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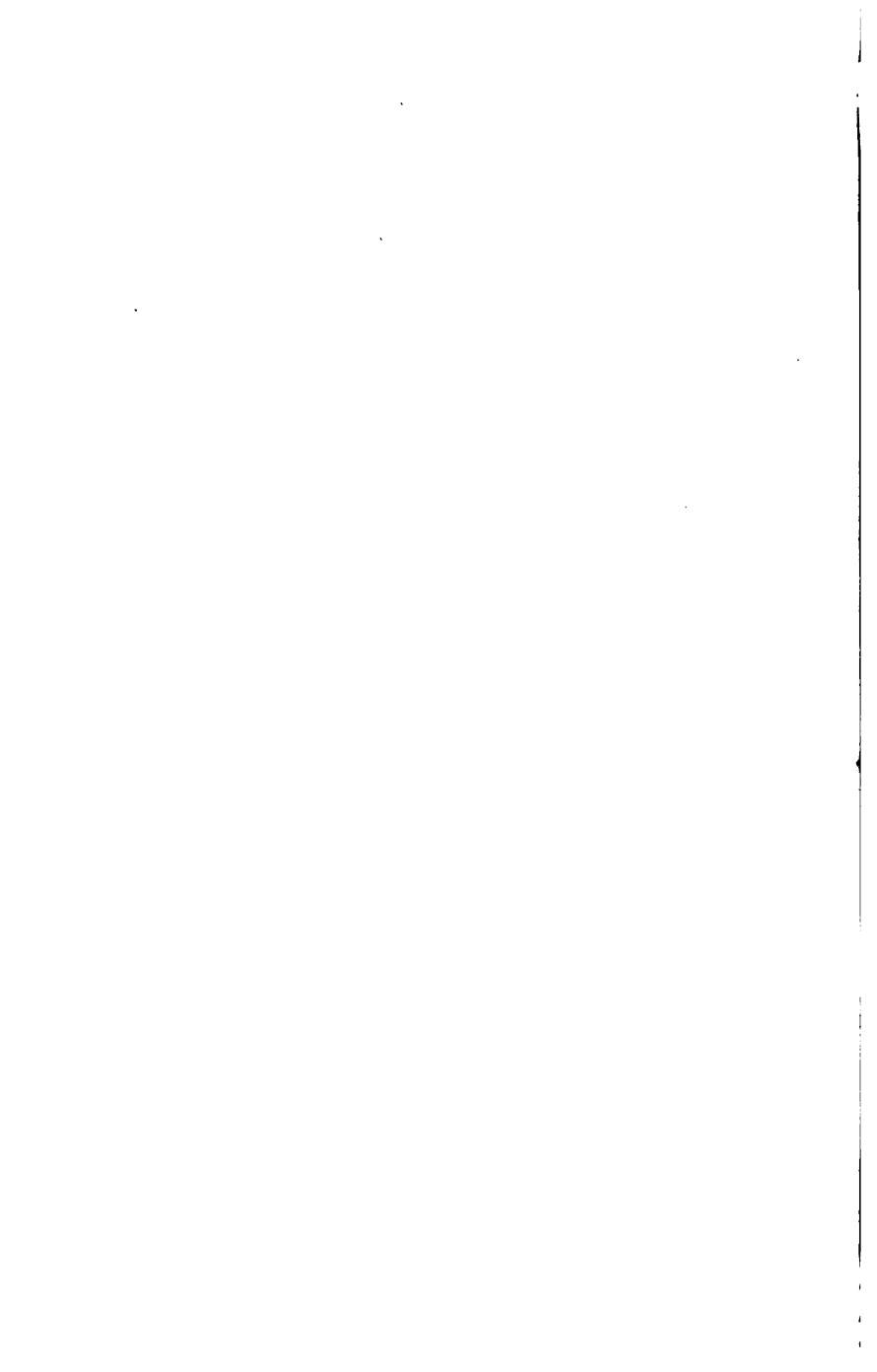
FROM

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THE STORY
OF
MARGARET KENT

A NOVEL

BY

HENRY HAYES,

σὺν μοι συνήβα, συνέρα, συστεφανηφόρει,
σὺν μοι μαινομένῳ μαινέο, σὺν σώφρονι σωφρόνει.

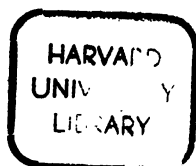


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1886

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THE STORY OF MARGARET KENT.

CHAPTER I.

AN AFTERNOON AT HOME.

THE impression which male visitors gained from Mrs. Kent's rooms was of their extreme charm and elegance. The deep-seated chairs and lounges were springy and comfortable, and the thousand minute details which made a picture for the eye all seemed invested with a worth beyond that of similar appointments in everyday houses. Women, however, understood at once the transparent artifice of these dainty touches: nothing was *en suite*, — it was evident that what was costly had been picked up as a "bargain;" there was a jumble of magnificence and pettiness, — cloth of gold and cheap imitations of oriental handiwork. Clever as some of the makeshifts were, they were still makeshifts to the initiated: the screens were obviously of domestic manufacture; although there were bits of Venetian glass, old Satsuma, and Capo di Monte, much of the bric-à-brac might have been picked up at Fourteenth Street bazaars.

The suite was three rooms deep, on the second floor of an old-fashioned house fronting Gramercy Park. The two largest rooms were practically one,

opening into each other with wide folding doors; the tone of each was alike rich and warm; and in the grate, on this chilly October day on which our story opens, a coal fire was burning. The tables were covered with a litter of the newest periodicals, both American and English, with here and there a volume from Michel Lévy's press. On every hand were to be seen unframed sketches in water-colors; a few good etchings, mounted in plain gold boards, hung against the walls, which were papered with Pompeian red, and over the fireplace in the front room was suspended a richly set picture of a female head, life-size. It was the portrait of a very young woman, executed perhaps with more spirit than command of technique, but containing the vital essence of a good portrait,—a vigorous individuality. It was a face which laughed, pleaded, tempted, and denied while you looked into it: the face of a girl apparently less than twenty, of rather an heroic type: the features were both fine and noble, with rare distinction about the eyebrows and the orbits of the eyes. The hair was reddish-gold, and the eyes dark blue, the skin of the dazzling whiteness of a water-lily. There was scarcely a vestige of color except in the lips, which showed like a carnation on the brilliantly pale face. This portrait presided over the empty rooms with a look at once dignified, insouciant, and a little imperious.

Presently a French clock chimed the half hour, and in a few moments' time a child of seven or eight years parted the portières of red stuff and lace which

hung over the entrance to the third room, and came out slowly, standing still in front of the clock and studying its face.

"Past half past three," she murmured, "time to get tea." She went back to the bedroom whence she had emerged;—a delicately furnished apartment, hung with chintzes, with a large mirror on one side, and on the other a writing-table covered with manuscripts. The little girl had been writing there, making painful pothooks in a copy-book. This she now closed and put away; shut the inkstand, a costly bawble, and wiped her pen in a deliberate, painstaking way. Next she opened the door of a small adjoining room, hardly larger than a closet, which contained a pellmell of housekeeping utensils and other lumber, and brought forth the various appurtenances required for afternoon tea. These she carried one by one into the middle room, where she drew out a folding table, covered it with an embroidered cloth, a silver tea-kettle with a lamp beneath it, a tea-caddy, sugar-bowl, cups and saucers. Having accomplished so much, the child drew a long breath of satisfaction, as if the task had involved considerable uneasiness as to the fate of the fragile porcelain. Again studying the clock, and finding it almost on the stroke of four, she hurriedly ran to the closet, and returned with a napkin full of long, delicately browned rolls.

These domestic preparations complete, she had leisure to attend to her own toilette. She was covered from her throat almost to her ankles with a brown

holland apron fitting closely like a frock. This she now discarded, unbuttoning it, then folding it with the utmost nicety, and putting it away in a drawer. Up to this moment she had been a solemn, dreamy-eyed child, pallid and cold as a statue. Slipping off this chrysalis, she gained color at once, her pale hair turned to gold, her skin grew like the freshest leaf of a blush rose, and her fine dark eyes showed themselves full both of beauty and imperiousness. Her dress was of dark red velvet, perfectly fitting the little figure, and ending, above the knee, in quillings of fine white embroidery; her feet and legs were encased in black silk stockings without a wrinkle, and her tiny slippers sported huge buckles. Round her neck she wore a broad collar of Irish point. Thus transformed in the twinkling of an eye, like a harlequin in a pantomime, the little girl took her seat in the front room, before the fire, just beneath the portrait. A clear resemblance might be traced between the faces of mother and daughter, for such indeed the two were. The child's eyes were brown instead of blue, and her chin more heavily moulded, but one face resembled the other. We have said that the portrait suggested an heroic type, but its effect was half lost in charm, prettiness, an air of hauteur and caprice, of elusive moods changeable as the wind. The child, on the contrary, had a steadfast air of intelligence and seriousness, to which her eyes added almost intensity. While she sat waiting, she heard footsteps on the stairs, and there presently came a tap at the door, followed on the instant by the sight

of a graceful laughing face peeping in at the opening.

"At home, dear?" said a sweet voice. "Oh, you delicious little creature," the lady added, entering and closing the door behind her. "Is your mamma out? Are you actually receiving visitors all alone?"

"Mamma will be in soon. Mamma said she was sure to be in in time for afternoon tea, for this is Mr. Bell's day."

"And may I sit down? May I stay? Or does Mr. Bell have it all to himself?" said the visitor, laughing softly.

"You can sit down, I think, Mrs. Townsend," returned the child, with perfect dignity. "I do not believe Mr. Bell will mind. There are almost always other gentlemen here when he comes."

"Oh, you are too irresistible!" exclaimed Mrs. Townsend, who had not waited for the permission, but had sunk back in a soft luxurious way into the furthest depths of the most comfortable looking arm-chair before the fire. "I dare say your pretty mamma is a good deal besieged."

"Besieged?"—with a bewildered air.

"I mean she has a great many men coming and going."

"Oh, yes!"

"Tell me about them, dear. Who are they?"

"Oh, there are a great many whose names I never tried to remember. There is Mr. Bell, and Colonel Weir, and the two Mr. Updegraffs and — oh! I forget who they all are."

"And do many ladies come?" asked Mrs. Townsend, always putting her question so softly, so smilingly, that the child, although a little constrained and tormented by the persistent interrogation, could not resist half smiling in return.

"Not so many ladies as gentlemen," she now answered.

"And does your mamma know Mr. Bell's nephew, Dr. Walton?"

"I don't remember him. Dr. Walton? No, I do not seem to know him at all. But then he may come while I am at school. I am not always with mamma."

"Oh, your mamma sends her little girl to school then?"

"I go to kindergarten every day from nine till one."

"And your mamma is always alone then?"

"She wants to be alone. She wants to write the whole morning through, but often I hear her say to Miss Longstaffe, 'That dreadful man spoiled my entire day. I have not written a word.'"

"And do you see Miss Longstaffe often?"

"Oh, Miss Longstaffe lives with us. She is always just upstairs in her studio."

"What a delightful chaperon! Always just upstairs."

"Oh, mamma sends for her very often. But mamma says I am her chaperon,—that she would never dare do anything naughty before me."

"Oh, you dear quaint little Puritan! I can un-

derstand that your pretty mamma is in awe of your solemn eyes! She is not so afraid of being naughty before Miss Longstaffe perhaps as before you."

"My mamma talks of being naughty, but she is never naughty," said the child, with a superb air. "My mamma talks and laughs about things that she never does."

"Of course she never does anything naughty."

"Of course she never does anything naughty."

Mrs. Townsend regarded the child with an amused air, as she repeated the phrase word for word but with a very different intonation.

"Let me see," she said meditatively, "Is your name Margaret, my dear?"

"Gladys Kent is my name."

"How much you look like your mother!"

Gladys glanced up at the portrait and smiled.

"Your eyes are dark," Mrs. Townsend went on smoothly. "I suppose you inherit them from your father."

"Yes, papa's eyes are like mine."

"Do you see your papa often?"

"I do not remember ever seeing my papa;" this with a certain indignation.

"Why, how is that? Little girls ought to know their own fathers."

"But he never comes. He used always to be coming, but now everybody has left off even thinking that he can be coming."

"He writes often to your mamma, no doubt."

"Oh, I don't know," said Gladys uneasily. "Mam-

ma does not say so, but then she has piles of letters she never says anything about."

"Do you know where your papa is?"

"He is in South America. He is not always in one place, but I think he is most in Rio Janeiro." Gladys started up and bent forward, listening. "I think that is mamma," she exclaimed. "I hope it is mamma; oh, it is! I am so glad—so glad—so glad." She threw the door wide open, and stood waiting, while Mrs. Townsend rose, shook out her satin draperies gently, peeped at her image in the glass, and, assuming an arch expression, sat down again, putting her elbow on the arm of the chair and leaning her chin on her hand. Mrs. Kent ascended the stairs lightly, followed by a very young man, with whom she was exchanging very light badinage. She kissed Gladys and swept into the room with a movement at once luxurious, gracious, and commanding, greeted Mrs. Townsend caressingly, and sat down opposite, pointing out a divan to her attendant.

"Don't you know Mr. Charlton, Lilly?" she asked. "I did not think of naming you to each other, as you are both that sort of people whom not to know is to argue yourself unknown."

"I have the pleasure of a slight acquaintance with Mr. Charlton's mother and sister," said Mrs. Townsend in her soft smiling way, "but I have never before had the pleasure of meeting him."

Mr. Charlton, who was a youth of faultless attire and grand manners, bowed very low.

"And I do not enjoy the honor of an acquaintance with Mr. Charlton's female relatives," said Mrs. Kent. "But then it atones for a great deal to know him. We happened to cross the ocean together in April, and it was really singular how our itineraries—as the tourist's books say—intersected each other all summer; I may say he is a part of all that I have met."

"And you returned together. I happened to see your names in the lists of arrivals."

Mrs. Kent laughed. "Dear Lilly," said she, "I know that nothing interesting ever escapes your eyes. We did return on the same steamer, but, unluckily, could not meet often, as the weather was rough and Mr. Charlton is not a good sailor." She looked at Gladys and smiled. "So tea is all ready, dear little housekeeper," she said. "Eight cups to-day?"

"I thought perhaps a great many gentlemen might happen to come, mamma."

"Do hear the child! What an *enfant terrible*! Mrs. Townsend will think I am in the habit of receiving a lot of men."

"But sometimes there are as many as that, and this is Mr. Bell's day."

"How do you know that?"

"He comes Tuesdays and Fridays always," persisted Gladys.

"She knows everything," said Mrs. Kent, who seemed excessively amused. "She is my housekeeper, my time-keeper, my conscience-keeper."

"Don't count how often I come, Miss Gladys," said Charlton.

"No, I do not count everybody," Gladys returned, with an air of excessive politeness.

"Like a sun-dial, she marks only the bright hours," said Margaret, with a glance at Charlton.

The original could now be compared with the portrait above the lace-trimmed mantel-piece. It became apparent that the artist had seized his subject at a moment when she was mutinous and gay and filled with life to her finger-tips. The real woman showed a little languor, and the languor added just the touch which gave a force to her beauty and a staying power which the airy, graceful ideal face did not possess. Margaret Kent was at this time just twenty-six, and the portrait had been painted three years before, but she had apparently not grown in the least degree older, and had lost not an iota of the delicacy of the most youthful beauty. She was above the ordinary height of women, and there was not a point in her exquisite figure, from head to foot, which did not show high perfection of organization. She was, besides, one of those fortunately moulded women who can do nothing ungracefully; and whatever was her attitude or occupation at the moment, it was something to be watched and studied. When in repose her face grew dreamy; and roused, her first expression was slightly imperious. Her imperiousness was, however, tempered by a tenderness so feminine, and by a spirit so arch, that no one had ever been afraid of her. Had she possessed no other fas-

cination, her voice would have charmed anyone. It was a southern voice, rich and sweet, just touched with the accent acquired from mammies and maids in early life, which is almost never lost, — for Mrs. Kent was an Alabamian.

She now set herself to the task of making tea, talking to Mrs. Townsend all the while, but not troubling herself to do anything for Charlton, who seemed nevertheless to find entertainment of a high order in merely looking at her.

Gladys had been sent up to the studio after Miss Longstaffe, and now returned, followed by a tall, thin woman, far from young and singularly plain, — dressed in an almost conventual habit of black just touched with white. She spoke to Mrs. Townsend in a stiff, almost brusque, manner, and her notice of Charlton was so slight that Mrs. Kent thought she had not recognized him at all, and said : —

“Here is Mr. Charlton, Sarah. You have not forgotten the day he helped you up the glacier.”

“I have quite forgotten his help,” retorted Miss Longstaffe. “But I do recall pulling him out of a crevasse.”

“Come, come, Miss Longstaffe,” said Charlton.

“What delightful times you must have had in Europe,” said Mrs. Townsend. “It would be something to travel with you, Miss Longstaffe.”

“Margaret needs somebody to manage the purse and the time-tables,” that lady replied. “I don’t flatter myself on my high value in other respects.”

“Oh, she may say that,” said Mrs. Kent, looking

at Miss Longstaffe, and her face lighting up, "but she really is everything to me. In all my life nobody was ever so good to me as Sarah. I say to her as they say in the East, 'You are my father and my mother and all my relations.' And as Andromache told Hector, 'Thou to me art all in one, sire, mother, brethren, thou, my wedded love.'"

"And on your side you are her inspiration," remarked Mrs. Townsend, looking up at the portrait.

"Yes, my inspiration," said Miss Longstaffe, who had in truth painted Margaret's portrait in a style so far beyond the mere elegance and chic of her landscapes and flower-pieces, that one could hardly believe it had been done by the same hand.

Mrs. Townsend drew her watch from her belt, looked at it, and declared that she must move on. She had two receptions to attend before six o'clock. She enumerated a dozen engagements for the coming week, with a protest against such demands upon her time before the season really began, and inquired concerning Mrs. Kent's.

"I hardly know what I have in prospect," Margaret declared, with the utmost gravity drawing out a little red book with a pencil attached. "So far, we have been so busy stuffing cushions and driving nails we have let everything go by. But we are down for a dinner with the Updegraeffs for the 29th, and at my cousin's, Mrs. Sinclair's, for the 30th. Then Ethel Sinclair has a coming-out tea, and there are some luncheons and things."

"Oh, indeed, you are really gay," said Mrs. Town-

send, flushing slightly. "I had no idea the Updegraffs were entertaining again. Do you know them well?"

"Oh, we are great allies," Mrs. Kent exclaimed, with vivacity.

"That is so nice. Well, dear Margaret, I am glad to have found you so prettily settled. I declare, your rooms have quite an air, although I know you made all the things yourself, you clever creature you!"

And glancing at everything which was a little below the mark, Mrs. Townsend moved towards the group, shook hands with all, kissed Gladys, and took her leave.

Margaret shrugged her shoulders when her guest was gone. "What lies that woman makes one tell," said she. "Don't you suppose she will have not only her own sins to answer for, but those she compels other people to commit?"

"She will never make me commit sins," said Miss Longstaffe.

"No, you do not care, but she raises a little demon of unrest and ambition in me. She is the last woman I should think of envying, yet I cannot endure to have her surpass me in any way. I do not want to be invited about as she is, yet it annoys me that she can enter in while I am barred out. She patronizes me; that is why I hate her, I suppose. She often asks questions which fret me, tells me facts which gall and discourage me. She makes her money by writing quite as much as I do, but pretends to be indifferent

to the occupation, and affects the fine lady. She is proud of her visiting-list, but actually is only a reporter in disguise. She fawns and truckles and gets admitted everywhere. Nothing goes on but that she has a ticket or a pass for it. I never go to the theatre or opera but that she is there in a better seat; I never have an evening out but that I hear of her having been at a more exclusive affair. If I ever get to Heaven, I expect to see her sitting near the Throne."

"Hush, mamma," said Gladys. "You would not let me talk like that."

"I was not going to let her believe that we had no social engagements," Margaret pursued. "George and Tom Updegraff want us to dine with them at Delmonico's, Sarah, and Mrs. Sinclair engaged me to-day for a family dinner. I do not like family dinners anywhere, and especially at the Sinclairs', but I promised to go. When Aunt Dora spoke of it I said, 'Why didn't you ask me to the "tea" the papers say you are going to give Ethel! I could not come and dine with you comfortably when I feel myself left out in the cold like that!' Aunt Dora was very much concerned that I should take it to heart; she said she had not supposed I should care about such a crowd, when I knew no one, but that she would send me a card at once. So it is settled, I am to go to the 'tea' and dine with them *en famille* besides. Then, as to the luncheon, you know Mr. Bell wants us to go to his place soon."

Charlton seemed immensely entertained.

"Why did you not tell her you were to dine with the Charltons', for you know I want you all to favor me."

"She knows your mother and sisters. I had told her I had never met them."

"I'll eat my hat if she knows them except in the most distant way. My mother is not so easily known, and she will never have those newspaper people at her house. Wait a little and you may tell Mrs. Townsend you visit my mother."

"Do you think she really will come to see me," asked Margaret eagerly.

"I promise you she shall. It is true that when I spoke to her about it, she said she knew too many people already, but some opportunity will arise presently, and then it shall come about. I do not know yet what she means to do this season, except that she will give a ball in January. I promise you you shall go to that and to something else, if possible more exclusive, intimate, and worth making an effort for."

"I shall depend on you. I do not really care about being in society; there are too many irksome necessities and responsibilities about the life. But it vexes me to think I know nobody, that I am left out of pleasant things and not missed, that feasts are spread of which I may not partake, and dresses worn which outshine mine. All the while, however, I like a nice little dinner at Delmonico's, for us four, better than one of those stupid, cut-and-dried banquets with cards and menus and bouquets and ten times too much to eat."

"I hardly blame women for barring you out," said Charlton. "There isn't one of them who could hold a candle to you."

"Nonsense," said Miss Longstaffe. "There are plenty of women who would snuff you out like a rush-light, Margaret. I don't think you are particularly fitted to shine in the great world. Besides, you could not go out day after day and night after night. You have got your work to do and your money to earn."

"Oh, I know, — I know all that. But Mrs. Townsend —"

"Don't be jealous of Mrs. Townsend. Who is she after all? Who ever saw her husband?"

"For the matter of that, who ever saw mine?" said Margaret with a little dreary laugh. "I've had to vouch for his existence for six years. But as for Mr. Townsend — he is shut up somewhere, I believe. It is a comfort that, with all his failings and shortcomings, my poor Robert is fit to be at large."

"Have you been out, Margaret?" Miss Longstaffe inquired, looking at the younger woman with a softening face.

"I went to see that tiresome editor, you know."

"Was he tiresome to-day?"

"No, he gave me fifteen dollars for the sonnet, and will let me have sixty for the story, provided it is rewritten and cut down to eight thousand words."

"A sonnet of yours ought to bring fifteen hundred dollars," said Charlton earnestly.

"I wish you were an editor, then," said Mrs. Kent,

laughing. "I should like such ideas to leaven the paltry imaginations of editors. Never did I need money more than now. In the first place, our European trip cost us five hundred dollars more than we meant to spend. And fitting up these rooms — why, we are actually ruined. You really cannot think how poor we are!" she went on, in the highest spirits. "We took stock of our common fortune this morning, and stood aghast at the results. It was all I could do to induce Sarah to allow me car-fare. She thought I might easily walk down town and back."

"Oh, mamma, dear mamma!" cried Gladys.

"Go on — go on," said Miss Longstaffe. "Tell him that I cut off the sugar in your coffee, too."

"Were you ever very poor?" asked Mrs. Kent, looking at Charlton.

"Once at Venice, the first time I went to Europe, I give you my word, I thought of turning highwayman. I had waited there for remittances which had been sent to Paris instead, and there happened not to be a man in the place, don't you know, whom I liked to trouble for a loan. I was hard up, I assure you, and gradually became poorer and poorer, until one day I was completely penniless. It did not seem to matter particularly, for my brother was coming that evening, and I was engaged to spend the morning with the Clairmonts, don't you see, who were at the Hotel Britannia, and it rained. But at noon what should it do but clear off, and out we went to St. Mark's, when Nelly Clairmont went fairly wild over

the doves. She made me buy corn for them, don't you know, and that corn took my last stiver. Well, she went on feeding them, and feeding them, and it made an awfully stunning picture, don't you know, to see them settle on her shoulders, and nestle in her hair. She kept her mother and me there until Mrs. Clairmont was quite worn out, and then she proposed to go into Florian's and dine and hear the music. And good gracious, Mrs. Kent, I give you my word you never would believe me if I told you what a dinner was ordered. Mrs. Clairmont kept saying, 'Shall we not have a little of this or that, Roger' (she called me Roger, don't you know; our mothers are cousins), and I could only say, 'Oh, certainly, by all means,' while all the while I kept thinking to myself, 'Who the devil is going to pay for this infernal luxury?' And I couldn't eat a mouthful, for my heart was in my mouth. You see I was young and wanted to be good form, and they were just the sort of people, don't you know, who never understand anything but what they are used to, and have an awful stony stare for any idea their experience has not given them. Mrs. Clairmont had already remarked, don't you know, that she hadn't her purse with her, and —"

"What did you do?" cried Margaret, with ardent sympathy. "I feel for you. There is no scrape about money I have not been in."

"Well, I began to shake like an aspen before they got through, and when the man brought the bill —"

"Oh, what did happen?"

"At that very instant I saw my brother come into the restaurant. His presence saved my life. If he hadn't appeared, I must necessarily have gone out and drowned myself in the canal."

"Oh, but that was not being poor," said Margaret. "That was a temporary embarrassment. Now, I may be temporarily at ease, but financial difficulties are the rule and not the exception with me. All the time Sarah and I were abroad we gave ourselves some small swing, as you may be aware. We thought it right at times to be extravagant,—the artistic temperament finds its best economy in a certain prodigality when the fit is on. We felt sure, too, that having seen, thought, felt what we did, we should come home inspired to produce masterpieces. On the contrary, neither of us has been able to shake off the effects of our holiday, that *laissez-aller* has spoiled us, and neither of us has been in the mood to do anything worth talking about since we got back in September."

"It is abominable that you need ever do anything except to have a good time. You ought to have fifty thousand a year!"

"Oh, if I had! What would I not put into my life? But no, I actually like my life as it is,—its anxieties, its makeshifts, almost its failures. A rational and guarded existence leaves the fancy and intellect so uninspired, so barren. When I went abroad last spring I enjoyed the feeling that I had taken all my possessions in my hand and cast them upon the die, as it were, of a European experience.

I like to risk something. We are Bohemians, Sarah and I. When we were arranging these rooms we thought of Champfleury and Henri Murger, who set up housekeeping on a somewhat similar scale, and had for the triumph of their upholstery a piece of purple silk, with which they decked out their sofa, that is two thirds of it, for the expensive fabric was too short to cover the whole, and the remainder of the space they had to fill in with books. There are all sorts of dodges and make-believes here; but in spite of Lilly Townsend's little fling, the whole effect is pretty, is it not?"

"I give you my word, I never saw such charming rooms in my life."

"We mean to take comfort out of them, and we shall make money and get afloat again and have a prosperous winter. Murger and Champfleury used to put all the contents of their exchequer into half-franc pieces, and spend one a day. Here is my fifteen dollars. Let us change it into dimes, Sarah. How many will that make, fifteen hundred?"

Charlton laughed, but without any particular mirth. He heard Mrs. Kent's words, and was diverted by them, but the kernel of their meaning distressed him with the fancy that she might be actually in need. What could he do to help her? A practical suggestion came, however, on the instant.

"Miss Longstaffe's pictures ought to sell," Margaret pursued. "She has three or four beautiful pieces at Bernhard's, which should command the attention of all connoisseurs."

"Oh, at Bernhard's?" exclaimed the young fellow, with an almost laughable alacrity. "What a good idea! Yes, anything at Bernhard's ought to sell."

Miss Longstaffe flushed deeply. Even little Gladys felt the meaning of the blush, and blushed in sympathy, but Margaret only laughed like a roguish child. The moment might however have become embarrassing had not fresh visitors made their appearance. Within fifteen minutes all the unused tea-cups were in requisition, and fresh tea had to be made. Charlton was crowded out of his comfortable place by the fire, and taking Gladys to the window he told her stories, looking back occasionally to see Margaret, brilliant with animation, talking to three consummately mature men who stood on the hearth-rug. She was twisting a note in her hands, and Charlton jealously wondered from whom it came. An hour later, when everybody had gone away, Gladys exclaimed, in a tone of disappointment,

"And Mr. Bell did not come to-day, although it is a Tuesday."

"This note is from him," said Mrs. Kent. "He came to the door, then went away. He wants us to lunch with him to-morrow, Sarah."

"Does he invite me by name?" asked Miss Longstaffe.

"Oh, yes; read it yourself and see."

The elder woman read the note with unusual eagerness. It ran thus:—

"I have been to your door, fair Margaret, but heard so many voices I turned away without going in. If I could have seen you, and Gladys, and Miss Longstaffe alone, I should have been happy. But these young fellows shine an old man down. Recompense me, will you not, by coming to lunch with me to-morrow — you, and Miss Longstaffe, and Gladys — at half past one. The carriage shall be waiting for you at twelve. Silvertop looks radiant these October days. We will walk in the woods, and Gladys shall go chestnutting.

HERBERT BELL."

"The messenger waited for an answer, and I told him that we would go," remarked Margaret.

"For one, I am enchanted with the idea," said Miss Longstaffe. "It is dreadful to have sent Mr. Bell away. But the thought of that archangel amid this rabble!"

"Rabble? It was a very exclusive set, I assure you of that. Col. Weir himself said so."

"I hate them," declared Miss Longstaffe. "I hate them all, and particularly Charlton, who is probably at this moment buying my pictures, and on whose charity we shall live for weeks to come. How could you give him that hint?"

"It was better than having him offer me a check. He was dying to do something, and he is rich — abominably rich!"

Little Gladys was listening with a certain strained, over-eager attention.

"Don't take Mr. Charlton's money, mamma," she now exclaimed, bursting into tears. "Oh, pray do not do it!"

"You absurd child," said Margaret, gathering the little girl into her arms and caressing her. "What do you mean? Do you suppose I would take anybody's money?"

CHAPTER II.

LUNCH AT MR. BELL'S.

MARGARET dropped in at Bernhard's the next morning, and was met by Bernhard himself, who told her with a radiant face that he was on his way to Miss Longstaffe's studio to engage more of her work at once. All her pictures, besides the plaques, had been sold since yesterday; two late in the afternoon, and two this morning. The dealer had no doubt given himself a fair commission, but it was a good-sized check he was carrying to the artist, and Margaret continued her walk in the highest spirits. This success was just what she and Miss Longstaffe needed to make their minds easy over their late extravagances. Miss Longstaffe had, it is true, a small assured income of her own, but Margaret was penniless except for the money she made by her pen. She had written a foolish anonymous little book the year before, which had found a lucky opportunity, made a hit, run through edition after edition, and brought her in almost two thousand dollars. Perhaps it was no wonder she had believed herself on the highway to fortune. Strange to say, those tangible results had by this time utterly melted away. The book had not had the requisite merit to give her

a permanent foothold in the literary world, even if it had been known to be hers. She had never claimed it, had in fact always been rather ashamed of it. In her quiet moments she suffered from the knowledge that she was always tiding herself over present difficulties by doing work which was only half worthy of her. She loved the best, and longed to do the best; but the grand things of life stood afar off, and though it seemed to her she longed to tread the difficult paths and scale the heights to reach them, some peremptory need compelled her to put off her great effort; rather, perhaps, some eloquently-soliciting self-indulgence consumed her energies instead. It was so hard for Margaret to remember that life has cares and responsibilities, cruel anxieties even, as well as pleasures. She hated to feel herself dull and discouraged; what she longed for was a permanent state of emotion and exhilaration which should lift her above all thoughts of everyday necessities. Thus, the spring before, finding herself a little jaded and spiritless, she had induced Miss Longstaffe to undertake a trip to Europe with her. After they returned, she had bent all her energies to the task of securing a pleasant home—a home where they might gather together a charming coterie. Yesterday she had felt doubtful about the practicability of carrying out their present arrangements. She had been full of doubts, penitence, remorse, over her debts and her liabilities. But Bernhard's check at once put her in a buoyant mood, and it would have been difficult to persuade her that she and Miss Longstaffe could not

make their life all that they desired. She felt the strivings of youthful and apparently inexhaustible energy, and the desire of infinite expansion into the broadest and richest paths of existence.

Anything which coerced, hindered, hampered her, Margaret hated and rebelled against. And it was enigmatical to her that freedom in action, expression, and expenditure should so often result in the most dismal bondage. Her first step towards absolute independence had been her marriage at the age of seventeen, when, instead of achieving liberty, she had learned to know what a yoke, a galling, pressing yoke, is. She had married to throw off parental rule, but, instead of an anxious and conscientious father, had gained a fond, foolish, and domineering master. At the time our story opens, Margaret had not seen her husband for almost six years, and it was at times difficult for her to remember that she had ever been married at all. Her father had died just at the time of the birth of Gladys, and Robert Kent, on taking possession of his wife's inheritance, invested it at once in schemes from which nothing had ever been realized. When Gladys was two years old he went to South America with the remnant of their fortune, hoping to make another. He had made no fortune, however; had, indeed, sent no remittances, and Margaret had supported her little girl and herself all these six years. At first he had written to his wife that he wanted her and his child with him as soon as he achieved success in some of his projects; but no success came. For the past eighteen

months Margaret had not heard from him in any way. One could not easily tell what thoughts lay in her mind concerning her husband. Sometimes weeks would go by without an allusion from her that recalled the fact of his existence; then again his name would be perpetually on her tongue, and she would pour forth reminiscences, kindly in the main, but sometimes full of sharp and bitter sarcasm on his incompetence, his bad management, his failures. She had been less than twenty when they had parted, and the six years which had passed since had been exactly those years which count most in deep moments lived, and ineffaceable impressions gained. As husband and wife — mere boy and girl as the two were — they had not been over-congenial, although they had known each other since their babyhood; and in his absence the cramp and pettiness of the tone of his letters had made her curl her lip in scorn of him many a time. How could she long to have him come back to her and Gladys, she sometimes exclaimed in vexation to Miss Longstaffe, when she felt that it would be almost impossible for her to love him as she must love a man in order to be a good wife to him. Thoughts like these, however, were something to put by. The present was too full of purpose, of enjoyment, of promise, for Margaret to suffer dismay at possibilities of the future.

It was a five-mile drive to Silvertop, which lay on the river. Mr. Bell stood waiting for them as they drove up, with his head bare. He was a man of seventy, tall, and still erect, his hair white as snow,

TORY OF MARGARET KENT.

eyes as serene and brilliant as they
uth. He was known in the world as
it was a simple and kind-hearted old
a of the boy about him still. As he
en the carriage door, two great dogs
rward, and fawned over Margaret and
ell kissed Gladys, and looked in Mar-
l smiled. He offered his arm to Miss
led the way to the house.

perfect day?" he said. "There are
or twelve days in October which
e wish to live, if there were no other
g existence. When I first came out
he veil of mist was just being rent,
as turning into a golden haze. All
nd gardens were a host of cobwebs,
h dewdrops and all sparkling like a
A flock of sparrows flew up before me
settled on the hedge-row. I was on
oods, to choose our walk for this after-
ll not tell you about that. First we
unch, and afterwards I flatter myself
eat treat in store for you."

our wraps here," said he, ushering
parlor; "then come into the library,
fire. It is more 'homey' there. In
ing-room a host may pass muster very
rawing-room a hostess is needed."

o hostess, dear Mr. Bell," said Mar-
had a wife or sister, she might not

"Then I would not have her. I have only a nephew, and he will share my delight in you. I asked him to come and spend the afternoon to-day, — rather grudgingly, it is true, — but he had an engagement, for which I forgave him heartily."

"So Dr. Walton has actually come back."

"He has been back a week. He is a good deal taken up with his book, and there is besides a fair lady in the case. So I cannot count upon his society as I hoped I might. My boy Alex, I used to call him, — I will take him to see you some time. Have you never been in my library before, Miss Longstaffe? Oh, I remember when you have been here we have always been on the piazza or out-of-doors. You are at liberty to feel and express as much enthusiasm for the room as you like. I myself am very fond of it. Most of my poetry has been written here. But I confess that when I did my best work, it was in a plainer room. I sometimes suspect my Muse has withdrawn herself since I brought so many of her sister arts in."

He went about showing his beautiful and unique furniture, his tapestry hangings, his pictures, etchings and bronzes to Miss Longstaffe. Margaret, who knew the room very well, sat down by the fire and looked dreamily out of the long windows which opened upon a beautiful garden with a background of crimson and russet woods which rose in folds to the range of hills that bordered the river. The quiet of the house, its luxury, Mr. Bell's soft benignant ways, all touched a deep and longing feeling at the bottom

of Margaret's heart. There was nothing in the world of which she felt so secure as of Mr. Bell's friendship, his affection even. It was in this very room she had first seen him, years before, when she had come, her heart in her hand as it were, to show him a poem and ask him if he thought anyone would be likely to print it and give her money for it. And his help then and his never-ceasing goodness since had been one of the substantial helps of her life. He was more to her than her own conscience; she trusted him absolutely.

"If I were free," she said to herself as she sat there, "if I were free, Mr. Bell would be glad to marry me. And then Gladys and I might live here. The struggles, the humiliations, the everlasting sense of failure, would be ended."

A strong rush of feeling came over her. She experienced an infinite homesickness for something sweeter and closer than she possessed,—for just such a sheltered happy life as this might prove to be. Thoughts which had stirred her as vague far-off possibilities suddenly looked her in the face. Nothing seemed difficult; law and justice seemed waiting for her to bend and direct them as she chose. She was not Robert Kent's wife, she said to herself,—why should she keep up this foolish show of allegiance to a man who had deserted her?

"Margaret," called Miss Longstaffe sharply, "see these." For in looking about the walls the artist had come upon two little sketches of her own.

"I found them at Bernhard's yesterday," said Mr.

Bell. "I fell in love with them at once, for I am very fond of Cape Ann scenery. I was glad to be able to secure them."

Margaret had joined the group.

"Sarah was never so proud and pleased in her life, I am certain of that," she said. "She was afraid Roger Charlton had bought them, and he is her particular *bête noire*."

"Oh, mamma," cried Gladys, looking up in her mother's face, "why are you so pale, and why are you crying, oh, mamma, dear mamma?"

They all looked at Margaret anxiously, but she laughed.

"Do you know that just now I had a tempter," said she. "He came to me there, while I sat in that chair, and showed me the kingdoms of the earth and the glories of them, promising them all to me if I would only consent."

"And what did you say?"

"I did not answer. Sarah, who is always my good angel, called to me, and the tempter vanished."

"But, after all," said Mr. Bell earnestly, "was he a tempter? Sometimes an unaccustomed thought seems to come from a tempter, but it may be the whisper of an angel all the time."

"Ah, the voice of the tempter again," said Margaret archly.

Lunch was ready and they went into the dining-room. Mr. Bell placed Margaret opposite himself, and Miss Longstaffe at his right. The table was round, and in the centre was a low dish filled with

tea-roses and bordered by alternate bunches of black hamburg and white muscatel grapes.

Margaret flushed slightly as she took this seat. It seemed to her that Mr. Bell had read her thoughts and recognized the distinct shape her wishes had momentarily taken. And when he now looked over at her and smiled, her eyes fell and her color deepened still more. She understood very well that he was not a man to be dazzled and transported like a youth. What he thought was best for her would be best and wisest for her. A sort of solemn serenity, a wordless joy, came over her as she met his smile.

"I want this good little girl close beside me, where I can take care of her," said Mr. Bell, putting his hand on the child's golden hair. "I have not heard yet what she has been doing of late. Has she been perhaps a little naughty? If so, I must know all about it."

"Gladys is never naughty," said Margaret. "I wish she would be. I often tell her not to be too good,—that good little girls die young. I read her the story of Red Riding Hood and Marjory Fleming and Little Nell. And I declare to her that after all, sad as their fates are, they are not the saddest, for that the good girls who live on have dreadful times, that they are victimized by all their relations, that they are made household drudges, go into convents and sisterhoods, or become nurses. With tears in my eyes, I beseech her to be naughty."

"I should not like to be naughty," said Gladys, almost frightened by her obligations.

"But you like naughty people; you particularly dote on naughty people, Gladys."

"Oh no, mamma."

"Now, I am a naughty person, a very naughty person," insisted Margaret.

"You may say that, mamma," replied Gladys, with intense seriousness, "you may say that over and over again, but I shall never, never believe it."

"That is right, Gladys," said Mr. Bell, "you and I believe in that harum-scarum mother of yours, and will go on believing in her, and our faith may save her. And in spite of all the pathetic results of being good, you will go on persisting in being good, will you not? Perhaps," he added, looking at Margaret, "perhaps she is only postponing her season of naughtiness. I dare say you were good when you were eight years old."

"Indeed I was never good. I led papa a terrible life. I used to wake him up at daybreak on winter mornings to read to me, and in summer to take me walking across the country. I was always spoiled and unmanageable, and he took my freaks so painfully to heart that the thought of his goodness hurts me nowadays. He was certain I should come to grief, if not by my own actions, then by the conflict which existed in the very nature of things between my instincts and ideas and the rules and formulas of this world."

"But you have not come to grief, mamma."

"Indeed I have come to grief."

The child looked pained and bewildered, and glanced over at Miss Longstaffe for some reassur-

ance. "I keep my skeleton in a cupboard, it is true, Gladys," Margaret went on, with irresistible archness. "But I always remember it is there, and I shudder when I go past that cupboard in the dark."

Gladys shuddered too in sympathy.

"Mamma, please tell me you are talking nonsense," she said, pleadingly.

"It is nonsense to little girls," said Mr. Bell. "It is only old and wise people who understand what she means. You see, Gladys, when we are young we make mistakes, and, not being able to get rid of their consequences, we thrust them away from us and try to hide them out of sight. But no matter how dark the place is, nor how rarely opened, we know all the time that they are there. For the thing is done and cannot be undone! What we have to do is bear the consequences of our short-sightedness. But the dread of doing worse wrong gives greater activity to our desire of doing right. So if we have made one mistake, we are less likely to make another."

"If I could be certain of that. But I suspect some people were born to go on from mistake to mistake; not to make them, one must proceed slowly, cautiously, secure each succeeding step, spend no strength in vain, and always be prepared when the right moment comes. Papa saw clearly how I was likely to be led away by excitement and the love of vanity. And when I was about sixteen he took fresh alarm, and looked about for somebody to keep me in order. I would not let a governess stay in the house; accordingly, he made a permanent arrange-

ment for a chaperon for me by marrying a wife. This was unexpected, and seemed to my mind a bold threat that here had come a force I could not throw off, a surveillance I could not evade. Then it was that Robert Kent suggested that it would be a most clever circumvention of papa's plans if we were to be married; accordingly, we were married."

"How long had you known your husband?"

"All my life. Our plantations adjoined each other."

"How long had he courted you?"

"He had never courted me at all. We had incessantly quarrelled, for we were both egotists, who thought the world existed for our sakes. We had never been the least in love with each other."

"Courtship is always too short nowadays," said Mr. Bell. "Three years is the least time you must allow any man to win Gladys in—and five would be none too much. As for yourself, Margaret, it never would have been safe for you to marry without having given a hard test,—you needed full seven years of trial, patience, fidelity in a man before you accepted him."

"The idea of having one man hovering about me for seven years! I fathom most of them deeper than plummet can sound in seven weeks."

"In the seven years you would naturally have had a dozen trying to please you at the same time, and you could have made them pass through all sorts of fiery ordeals, have put them to all sorts of tests."

"She is tolerably certain to have done that," said Miss Longstaffe.

"But don't you see I might have wanted to marry the entire dozen?" said Margaret. "One might have had the manners to suit my taste, another the hair, and another the eyes, —"

"Don't talk of hair and eyes!"

"But take moral qualities; one might be patient, one spirited, and a third clever; one might be strong, and another wise. Who could expect that one would sum up the perfections of the other eleven?"

The four plates and knives and forks had been changed a great many times before they rose from table. Mr. Bell liked to believe his friends were *gourmets*, although he was no *gourmet* himself. He ate very little, but picked out many a choice bit for Gladys. He liked to look across the bacchanal profusion of grapes and roses to Margaret. Her beauty, her southern spontaneity and swiftness of gleeful apprehension in her manner and utterance, delighted him. All she said was to his perception both bright and original. As he was an old man, probably what he set most store by was her finely rounded mental and physical development: she had a grand physique, health, strength, high spirits, and was so absolutely free from grovelling wishes and ideas that she could be thoroughly frank in action and speech, without displeasing his rather over-fastidious taste. Perhaps if she had possessed all this beauty and original force, and had at the same time been able to master the world and direct all it contained into channels towards herself, he might have admired her without loving her. Her manifold endowments might then

have steeled his heart against her. He liked her as Esther rather than as Vashti. She was poor: she was compelled to gain the very bread she ate by her own will and energy; she needed his tender encouragements, his patronage, the kindly shutting of his eyes to her pretty feminine follies; his steadfast will to govern her through all his indulgence. Of late he had begun to revolt against this matrimonial bondage of hers. Certainly, looked at from any point of view, it was a wanton tampering with the scanty opportunities of a woman's life for her to be spending her youth like this. Of all women in the world, she most needed the shield of a man's presence and a man's care. He shrank from the idea of Margaret among the great class of *divorcées*, but if, when free, she were to become his own wife, he believed it might be one of those compensations which reinstate a woman. There was neither vanity nor arrogance in this, but an honest and simple purpose to do her good and atone for what she had so far missed in the world. This idea, hitherto shadowy, to-day took shape and gathered meaning before his eyes as she sat there facing him. Until now it had been presentiment; this was reality. Behind her were the long windows opening into the garden, where the noontide warmth and radiance were shimmering and melting into mid-afternoon. The sun struck the trees beyond, which blazed with a wonderful illumination.

"Banners yellow, glorious, golden,"

the old man said to himself as the bright leaves floated down. Bees and wasps were alike busy, humming over the flowers or among the trellises, where the grapes were sweetening to their full lusciousness. Mr. Bell's was a very fresh old heart, and he thought it would have been sweet to lead Margaret up the slopes, along the narrow path at the top of the hill, fringed with asters and clematis, overlooking the river, and there to have settled it at once that she was to be his wife. It was a distinct barrier to all his instincts and wishes that she had a husband already in existence. He was not used to imposing his own inclinations upon the world as his creed of what was true and noble, and he felt more than a little puzzled by his present apparently lawless attitude. He felt urged to talk over the matter with some true friend of Margaret, and, looking at Miss Longstaffe's strong, clear face, he determined to speak to her.

CHAPTER III.

UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE.

IT was three o'clock before the quartette entered the woods, brightly illuminated with their own prodigal color, but whose depths the sun hardly pierced. The trees still held their leaves; and although the oaks were yet green, the maples, chestnuts, beeches, and dogwood were all aglow with colors compared with which sunshine was almost pale. They seemed, in fact, to have gathered into themselves all the glow and richness of the vanished summer. Here and there stood single trees, marvels of clear tone, every leaf of which seemed to have been dipped in flaming crimson, or, again, to rival the primrose in its pure yellow. Then again a maple would offer every warm shade on the palette, and the eye became conscious of gradations of color for which there is only sense, no name. The deepest recesses of the copse were lit up with the gay tints of the scarlet and yellow foliage, the ilex berries and the hips and haws of the rose and thorn. Although few leaves were missed from the trees, the wood was nevertheless "paved with patines of bright gold," red and bronze, which made an exquisite mosaic for the four to tread. Miss Longstaffe and Gladys led the way, pausing now

and then to look back and ask Mr. Bell which of the divergent paths they were to take. After the walk of a mile the woods ended, and they came upon a wilderness of flaming sumach, ferns, and bracken, green with fine dark grass and greener moss, and thickly strewn with acorns which had dropped from their cups and sprouted in the warm, damp October, as if for a century's growth. Here was a long, narrow pond with a broad fringe of many-colored leaves about its banks, half-overgrown with slender rushes, brown cat-tails and pointed flags.

"Now we will look for chestnuts, Gladys," said Mr. Bell. "There is a famous tree somewhere about here."

He took the lead along a narrow path through thorn-thickets, tall brakes and saplings, and presently came upon an open space beneath a gigantic chestnut, almost entirely surrounded by a wall of fern and brier, a few asters still showing their waning stars among the brambles, and here and there a thistle in fresh bloom. The fine thin grass was strewn with green burs and glossy nuts, and both Gladys and Margaret gave a little scream of delight.

"All my life long," said Margaret, "I have loved to go nutting, but I never had a fair chance before."

Gladys was carrying a little basket Mr. Bell had lent her, and now she gave her mother a wistful glance while her hand tightened upon it.

"Dear mamma," she said with intense earnestness, "I must keep this basket—I must indeed. But you have your bag, you know, and your pockets; those

large pockets will hold a great deal, but I have only this little one. Say I may keep the basket."

"You may keep the basket, Gladys,—but you will need to work hard to pick up as many nuts as I shall."

She flung herself into the occupation with the most absolute zest, while Gladys set herself to compete in a sort of fury of emulation. The two dogs, the great Siberian bloodhound Czar, and the collie Davy, snuffed about the ground finding the chestnuts and cracking them with their teeth. Mr. Bell led Miss Longstaffe to a fallen tree-trunk, and asked her to sit down and watch the pretty group. Margaret had thrown off her long cloak with great silver clasps, and in her plain black dress and plumed hat, her golden hair, her radiant coloring—which grew more and more brilliant as she flushed with the exertion of stooping—she was a sight to stir the coldest into admiration.

"I had my gardener shake the tree for Gladys," said Mr. Bell to Miss Longstaffe; "and lest some marauding boy should get in, he has been watching here ever since. But let them believe it was a happy accident."

"Margaret is always ready to accept miracles. She believes in them—counts on them almost."

"She is a miracle-worker herself."

"Is she not? How beautiful she is," cried Miss Longstaffe. "I should like to paint her at this moment."

"I wish you could. Did you ever see a grown

woman so naïve and spontaneous? She is quite as much in earnest as Gladys herself."

"If I had ever found her self-conscious when I believed her to be artless, narrow when I liked her to be generous, ignoble when I had credited her with all that was noble, I could not love her as I do."

Mr. Bell looked at the plain unyouthful woman, whose cold face was mellowed by her enthusiasm.

"You please me," said he, sitting down close beside her on the stump. "I like to have you praise her, for you have enjoyed unique opportunities of knowing her well."

"Have I not? She has plenty of faults; but no vices — no, not one. She is light at times, but her levity does not come from any lack of depth and richness of character. So far she has not been able to love or believe deeply. She has had to skim the surface of things — to take what she could in flying. She has had no chance to live — that is, to live well. But she is good, she is brave, she is pure."

"She likes admiration," said Mr. Bell, after a moment's pause. "She draws too many men about her."

"There is safety in numbers," said Miss Longstaffe dryly. "She is not free to form an attachment. She desires only stimulation and amusement. Do not for a moment imagine that I should not prefer to have her live a more quiet and secluded life. But I understand that extravagant and idealizing mind, eager for work, thirsting for pleasure, longing for the most

intense life, hating to be condemned to monotony and narrowness."

"How long have you known her?" asked Mr. Bell, curiously touched and pleased.

"Four years."

"And you liked her from the first?"

"I was afraid of her at first. She seemed to me a force, and a dangerous force. Naturally I resented her position, virtually separated from her husband; I do not like it now. But I came first to love her, afterwards to believe in her."

"That is like a man's feeling—not a woman's. A man believes in a woman because he is already passionately attached to her. But friendship usually begins differently."

"Perhaps I am in love with her," said Miss Longstaffe, her grim face never changing. "I never was in love with a man, so, do not know exactly what the feeling is. But she expresses the sweetness and the charm of life to me. She realizes my dreams—fulfils my ideals. Unless I had known her I should have missed what is most beautiful in all that I have seen."

"And she returns your affection," said Mr. Bell, cordially.

"Oh, she likes me. She is warm-hearted. She knows that I am faithful and that I would do anything for her in spite of my cold forbidding ways. I do not often flatter her. I can say these things to you, Mr. Bell, because you understand me. But I should never say them to anyone else. I used to

be very desolate before I knew her. Then when I made her acquaintance and saw her only occasionally it changed my life, and it seemed to me it would make me absolutely happy to be with her always. Now I am with her habitually and I am not absolutely happy, — far from it at times, — but oh, what a difference from five or six years ago."

"Is she happy?" asked Mr. Bell, with a sort of quiver in his voice.

"She is generally in a happy frame of mind. She is easily made happy, and she has the resolution to shut her eyes and ears to suggestions of the happiness she cannot attain. What I have always dreaded for her is that she should wake up as it were."

"That she should have some strong emotion — that she should fall in love, you mean."

"Yes."

"Do you think that she ever loved her husband?"

"I am afraid she never did. Never for a moment. If she had ever loved him, she would have a different feeling about his deserting her in this way."

Mr. Bell did not speak for a time. Margaret's laughter suddenly sounded above the rustle of the leaves. She and Gladys were comparing their respective spoils, each claiming to have surpassed the other.

"Are you tired of waiting, Mr. Bell?" she called.

"Not in the least."

"I should like to fill my basket full, quite full," said Gladys. "Please do not want to go back till then."

Mr. Bell looked at Margaret and smiled, then transferred his gaze to Miss Longstaffe, the smile going out of his lips and eyes, and a peculiar solemnity coming into both.

"Her husband has done nothing for her for years," he now observed, with deep and impressive vehemence.

"She has had no money from him except one hundred dollars since Gladys was two years old, and now she is eight," said Miss Longstaffe.

"He has left her alone at a time when she was peculiarly exposed to temptation and to danger. It is not his fault that she has not had to live by painful makeshifts or in direst poverty."

"No," said Miss Longstaffe, rather doubtfully.

"You do not wholly agree with me."

"I think she might have gone to South America and shared his fortunes. He talked about it for two or three years after he went there."

"She told me once that he never wrote, 'Come, I have a comfortable home for you.' What he said was, 'I mean before long to send for you and Gladys.'"

"That is true. I have read his letters."

"Well, how could she have gone?"

"She took pains to show him that she was doing very well, and that she infinitely preferred to live in New York and have a chance to try to earn her own living."

"I cannot blame her for that; can you?"

"Not in the least. I believe the man to be weak

and incompetent. How much worse than that I cannot tell. Six years, between the age of twenty-two and twenty-eight, are likely to make a difference in anyone."

"Of course they do. For my own part, I have serious doubts about the reasons of his silence. I have —"

"So have I," said Miss Longstaffe, not waiting for him to finish.

"My dear lady," he went on, "did you ever think that Margaret might be free? That she might begin life anew?" He looked into her face earnestly, his brown eyes growing more and more brilliant. "Ought her friends to allow her to be bound by this meaningless tie?" he proceeded, impetuously. "Should we not all demand it as her right that she should have the opportunity to marry a man who will support her, protect her, cherish her?"

Miss Longstaffe's own gaze dilated as she looked back at him. She not only heard his words, but she knew the meaning which lay behind them. She answered without hesitation.

"Certainly, it has occurred to me that she might, under the statutes of certain of the states, be divorced from her husband."

"You have not yet answered me."

"I should like to have Margaret free and happy, just as I should like her to be rich and prosperous. But I should not like to hear her say, 'I will be free and happy no matter what reasons there are for me to be otherwise,' any more than I would have her

say, 'I will be rich no matter what law or right exists against it.' There are things which are forbidden us."

"And you consider that a happy second marriage is forbidden to Margaret?"

"While her husband lives — of course, I do."

Miss Longstaffe, always abrupt and a trifle harsh, was now actually fierce. She made a momentary pause, then went on. "Her marriage was a mistake, of course; but it is so hard a matter to be wise. And the conviction that a memorable event in our lives was a mistake by no means undoes it. Don't you see, Mr. Bell, that the capricious want of a single mind must not be allowed to disturb the permanent order of things? She promised to be faithful to a man until death. Suppose, at some future time, that weak, foolish boy should need her very much, and that she had formed other ties and assumed other obligations, — how hideous it would be!"

Mr. Bell had reached out to Miss Longstaffe, expecting support and not a little sympathy. Experiencing this reverse, he felt an uneasy, dizzy sense that he had lost his footing, and hardly knew how to regain it.

"You are rational," he said, coldly, "you are rational."

"I mean to be," she rejoined. "Feelings which gather force from selfish instinct have had little to do with making the world full of noble examples. One thing is absolutely certain, that every human being is under the fatal necessity of fulfilling his or her obligations, or else suffering punishment, or, what is

worse, moral deterioration. Margaret's duty is to do the best she can for herself and Gladys until Robert Kent comes back to her. He will come back. He looks up to her and he adores his child. He has been in one quagmire after another, and has gone floundering on in a bewildered sort of way, until he has forgotten everything in the face of present difficulties. But finally he will be at the end of his last resort, and then he will return to his wife. She will probably have to uphold and support him until the end."

"What a life you predict for her! Alas, alas!"

"I know it is sad—it is horribly sad; but then, don't you see—" Miss Longstaffe was going on, but caught sight of Mr. Bell's averted face and stopped short. The very hue of his complexion had changed; something withered and wintry seemed to have come over it; his features had stiffened into pale rigidity.

"Oh! I have been harsh," she murmured penitently. "I am always harsh."

Mr. Bell shook his head, half smiled, and rose.

"It is getting cold and rather late," said he. "I think we must go home."

Margaret and Gladys were coming towards them in high glee, the dogs walking slowly behind, wagging their tails. The sun had declined, but from its low level seemed all the more to light up the reddened and bronzed foliage. The little pond showed all the colors of the rainbow; the trees took on a deeper flush; even the shadows became gloriously purple.

At this moment a fine setter came dashing with exuberant delight of recognition towards Czar and Davy, and the party all turned to see who was approaching. Two tall figures were visible emerging from the wood — a girl in a dress of white serge and black velvet, with a little black velvet cap on her head, and a man, passably young, with a square, strong, but rather plain face, clean shaven, lighted by dark brown eyes, which matched his hair.

"Why, Uncle Bert!" he exclaimed, "you have caught us in the very act of trespassing."

"Yes, you vagabond; you meant to keep out of my way, but I found out your secret. How do you do, Miss Devereux? I thought his enchantress might be you."

"Good gracious! Don't call me such names, Mr. Bell," said Miss Devereux, in a high-pitched, monotonous voice.

She leaned across the briers and ferns between them, shook hands with the old man, and passed on at once, calling her dog, who followed reluctantly. Her companion had taken off his hat, and was looking at Mrs. Kent and Gladys in a manner denoting lively expectation; but Miss Devereux's unswerving movement left him no alternative except to pass swiftly on. Once, however, he glanced back and caught sight of Margaret looking after them. He lifted his hat with alacrity, and their eyes met. The encounter had been a momentary thing, but it seemed to have startled both.

"That is my nephew Alex," said Mr. Bell. "I

should have been glad to introduce him to you, Margaret, but Miss Devereux seemed to be in urgent haste."

"So that was Dr. Walton?"

"Yes."

"And the lady — did you call her Miss Devereux?"

"Yes."

"Are they engaged?"

"I cannot speak with authority, but they are supposed to be engaged. I said to him that I was ready to congratulate him as soon as I was informed that he was to be married, and he answered, 'All right, I will give you plenty of time.' There can be little doubt about the truth of the report, for Alex is always in earnest if he undertakes the least enterprise."

"How happened they to be here?" asked Margaret, absently.

"The Devereux place adjoins mine. I dare say they had been to the Mortons', who live below, and were making a short cut."

"He is a physician?"

"Yes. Perhaps more of a scientific man than a physician. He has been experimenting with germs, and has written a book on zymotic diseases. I believe his theories are considered quite important."

"Is he rich?"

"He has a small income of his own, and it has usually been supposed that he would come in for something from his old uncle?"

"That is you?"

"Yes. He is my only blood relation."

"Happy Miss Devereux!" exclaimed Margaret. "I take it for granted you approve of the marriage."

"Nothing can be said against it. Everybody knows who and what the Devereux are, and what they have always been. Candidly, I was surprised to hear that Alex had a fancy for one of them."

"Why so?"

"They are all cold, formal;—the bias in their minds is all towards the accepted and the commonplace. The world seems to them created and furnished on their account. There is 'no speculation in those eyes that they do glare with.'"

"You like speculation in the eyes. So do I. Your nephew has plenty in his glance. His eyes are like yours, Mr. Bell," said Margaret, taking the old man's arm and looking up into his face. "It was that which struck me in seeing him. When he came out of the wood, it seemed to me that the same thing had happened to me before, or that I had foreseen it. I was indescribably bewildered for a moment."

"I have spoken to him about you; you remember I gave you a letter to him when you went to Europe, which you ought to have found a chance to deliver. I don't feel sure how well you and he would get on together, but he would delight in Gladys. He worships children."

"Did you like Dr. Walton's looks, Gladys?" Margaret asked, half jealously.

"I was looking at the beautiful dog, mamma."

"Did you admire him, Sarah?"

"I was admiring Miss Devereux," returned Miss Longstaffe. "She impressed me as quite the most magnificent personage I had ever seen."

"I only observed that she was dark, rather pretty, and consummately well dressed," said Margaret. "Why do you think Dr. Walton and I are not likely to get on well together, Mr. Bell?"

"I hardly said that. He is a little addicted to formulas where women are concerned. You might give him new insight, for he has never spent time in studying your sex, and has learned more concerning them from phrase-books than from experience."

"Miss Devereux ought just to suit him then," said Margaret. "Dear Mr. Bell, you look cold; we must go back. I will put all this in a story. That is my salvation. It is a great thing for a human being to have a wastepipe of that sort. Unless I could get rid of the overflow of sentiment and romance in that way, it might be dangerous for me to get a glimpse of such people. Don't suspect me of putting my feeble rush-light of an inspiration against the sun of your genius, Mr. Bell, but did you never put your pang of passionate longing into a sonnet, and so get rid of its sweet deep sting?"

Mr. Bell laughed slightly. "Keats said that our prime objects become a refuge as well as a passion," Margaret went on. "I love my work because it is a retreat from my actual experiences. When I am at work upon a story, my personal pains, limitations, and experiences do not control or persuade me. In actual life, things which are right for other people

are never right for me ; but in my domain of what I may venture to call art I may pick and choose. I need not limit myself nor be hindered ; I may stretch myself to the farthest bounds of the universe if I will. Unless I had this shelter from the cold pelting rain of the cruel world, I should be helpless and exhausted. But art makes me like the things I am cut off from. If I could not write a story about Miss Devereux, I should almost hate her for her princess-like airs. But as it is she amuses me. I got a clear inspiration from her pretty disdain."

"I am not sure about her disdain. She has been brought up to address only those to whom she has been ceremoniously introduced. She has not the tact, nor the wit, nor the generous breadth of mind to break over her limited mannerisms into nature and freedom."

"I wonder if she is in love with Dr. Walton," murmured Margaret, dreamily.

"She will love him devotedly when she is married to him."

"Oh ! but that is not loving him !"

"I see your meaning. She is no Cleopatra, who can make a complete surrender of herself to love. But do not let us talk about her. She is quite uninteresting to me even as my niece-elect. I would rather have you talk about yourself and your work. Have you been doing much lately ?"

"Nothing worth doing."

"Wait patiently. Sometimes with me months have gone on, and, though I listened with open ears, not a voice sounded for me in the whole universe."

"So it has been with me of late. It has happened before, and I have shuddered at the thought that I had wandered into the desert of Sahara, — an arid and bitter waste, where no stream flowed, and no flower bloomed for me. Then, when almost in despair, suddenly I would wake up out of my dreamless sleep with a revelation of life and its possibilities. My mind would be running over with thoughts, which I must utter or die for it."

"You have the temperament of genius."

"The heart sometimes gets a push — a fresh opening into the land of the ideal. Is it not strange that merely seeing your nephew and his fiancée has sent me far above any mood I have had for months and months. I believe in my own powers; I realize my ability to accomplish something; I feel for what grand stakes the game of life may be played."

"You are a poet," said Mr. Bell, "although you are not exactly an artist. You have plenty of the artistic feeling; but an artist is actually a person who knows his trade well — who has an absolute mastery of processes. He may do the thing by a flash of inspiration, or he may do it by painful and careful labor, but he does it in the best way. You will have to work harder over the purely mechanical part before you are master of your profession. You have everything except the technique. Study that with perseverance and energy."

The old man was drearily conscious, while thus lecturing and tutoring the pretty young woman, that he was far enough from carrying out his half-formed

plan for the afternoon. But his salvation seemed to lie in keeping clear of dangerous subjects. He experienced a chill, a numbness, a profound disappointment, to which he could hardly have ascribed an adequate cause.

Margaret made a grimace delicious and irresistible.

"That is what Miss Longstaffe is always preaching to me. Now, everything purely technical inspires me with repugnance; and nothing could convince me that manner is more than matter. I would rather rough-hew a colossus from a rock than carve the most perfect head upon a cherry-stone."

Mr. Bell laughed at this rather daring plagiarism.

"Did not one know where you stole that, one would believe you to be admirably clever."

"Oh, it is not easy to impose upon you. I shall get Miss Longstaffe to tell me what you and she were talking about so earnestly while Gladys and I were picking up chestnuts."

"We spoke of you a good part of the time; and then Miss Longstaffe gave me some of her views on the large subjects of the world. She seems a safe guide for you, Margaret; I am so glad you have a safe, sure guide like that. So many of us cannot see just what is true and what is false."

He looked wistfully down at the rosy oval of the upturned face, and sighed. Her very unconsciousness smote him to the heart.

"A safe guide," repeated Margaret. "You may well call Sarah that. If ever I wish to do anything wrong, I shall run away; for I could not look her in

the face and not tell her the worst sin that lay on my conscience. She can make me confess my faults as nobody else has ever made me do, and sometimes she makes me hate my faults and long to be free of them. And yet how can I be free of what is really a part of myself? So, when she puts me in that mood, I have to restore myself to good-humor by wearing my prettiest clothes and making everybody admire me; not admire me as she does, in spite of my faults, — but because of my faults. But still I am never so pleased as when she praises me, — except when you praise me, dear Mr. Bell.”

She looked up with a glance which shook Mr. Bell's resolution. Miss Longstaffe had mortified but not convinced him. She had, in fact, not a little touched and hurt his pride, and he said to himself that he had always abhorred strong-minded women, with their cold rational quibbles, which left heart and mind quite barren. Still, he was not yet ready to give himself away to a course of action which might provoke censure from his best friends. He had determined to wait and see, and to think it over before he suggested a wholly new line of action to Margaret.

It was almost dark when they entered the house; and after they had sat in the firelight for an hour, dinner was ready. Gladys slept in her mother's arms all the way back to town. Once more at home, Margaret undressed the sleepy child and put her in bed. An hour or two later, when both heads were on the same pillow, cheek pressed to cheek, the pale yellow curls

nestling against the hair of deepest gold, the little one murmured something as if in a dream.

"What is it, darling?"

"Oh, mamma," said Gladys sleepily, "was it not beautiful to-day in the wood?"

"Yes, my dear little girl."

"And was it not kind of Mr. Bell to let us bring home all those chestnuts! I was thinking, mamma, I was thinking I should like to have a party, and —"

"Roast the chestnuts for them. What a delightful idea! And whom should you invite?"

"Mr. Bell," answered Gladys. "Mr. Bell and Miss Longstaffe and you."

CHAPTER IV.

A HOME THRUST.

MARGARET KENT had come to New York some five or six years before, almost an absolute stranger; and the acquaintances she had made had almost invariably come from some accidental collision, in which sympathetic impulse counted for little or nothing. She had written a series of "Letters from a Southerner," which had found favor among the readers of a weekly paper, and the flatteries of the editor had been her chief encouragement to try to make a living by literature. She had tried first one expedient and then another, and had at one time been associated with a certain Miss Fothergill in the editorship of a children's magazine. Seeing ripe Hesperidean apples waving on the boughs, and longing for them, Margaret had at first believed that all she had to do was to reach upward for the golden fruit. Defeat soon taught her to distinguish between her ideals and the actual. She had not been credulous, only inexperienced. She soon gave up bold schemes, and tried to do something safe and remunerative. She had some imagination, but it did not usually run away with her practical judgment: she was capable of a just conception of what life is; the world, with its compli-

cated machinery of demand and supply, its checks and balances, its seesaw of chances for rewards and punishments, had a palpable existence to her. She had half enjoyed her initiation into failure, and had long since come to wonder only at her own greenness in having been influenced by Miss Fothergill, who possessed one of those minds with an inaccurate and strong generalizing bias which at the least suggestion of a novel idea take the farthest sweep of curve into unknown space. But she had nevertheless always liked Miss Fothergill; and, although nowadays she never followed that erratic lady into her wide reach of orbit, she always rejoiced when their planes intersected. Margaret was in truth a born lover of ideas, and a born hater of commonplace people.

It happened that Miss Fothergill came to see her a day or two after the luncheon at Mr. Bell's; and, finding that she was at home and at her writing-table, pushed her way into Margaret's retreat and sat down opposite. She was a large, rather florid person, of no particular age, gifted by nature with a clear resonant voice and an impressive manner, to which her present habit of public speaking had given more than an agreeable emphasis. It is difficult always to say profound, wise, or witty things, and men and women who address assemblages are lamentably liable to take the same tone with which they proclaim great doctrines when discussing small personal topics.

Miss Fothergill's dress generally showed some compromise or some conflict, as the case might be,

between that in vogue for the women of to-day, and that which the sex was likely to assume when it had developed to the point of indifference to feminine traditions, predicted by its well-wishers. Nevertheless she displayed a keen interest in everything Mrs. Kent wore, and at once remarked upon her white flannel negligée, just belted at the waist, which took the folds of antique drapery.

"And your parlors, how pretty they are," Miss Fothergill went on, with deep and measured emphasis. "But have you not put too much of yourself into them?"

"I have put too much of my money, if you mean that," Margaret replied, laughing. "Those chairs and sofas have left me wofully poor."

"I cannot be sorry for that. I have always suspected you of being too successful for your own good. Depend upon it, poverty is the spur you need."

"I never found success easy," declared Margaret. "I am dreadfully tired of trying to do something. People talk so much nowadays about genius being nothing but the capacity for taking infinite pains, about the difference between the feeble and the powerful, the great and the paltry, being the amount of energy and determination put forth, that I am induced to try to go on hammering out what I can."

"You must put your heart and mind into your work," said Miss Fothergill, warming to the occasion. "You must infuse into it more of a high seriousness."

"But who wants high seriousness? Everybody wants to be amused."

"That is your mistake. People in general feel life to be a very serious matter, and you will find that the books which sell by thousands are not those which discuss the problems of existence with wit and airy badinage, or make a show of cynicism, but which come face to face with realities and grapple with them. Study into your own heart and your own life, your own crying needs, anxieties, hopes and despairs, and you will have enough to say. You cannot lavish yourself as you do in trivial matters, in coquetry, in love of luxurious surroundings, and at the same time command your supreme powers when you sit down to write."

"But then I haven't any supreme powers."

"You mean you have no beliefs," thundered Miss Fothergill. "And how can you have beliefs when you live as you do, without realities in your life. How can you see by the clear light of day while you sit under the flicker and the glare of wax candles? How can you gain a true estimate of things while you are devoting all your powers to keeping up certain illusions which pamper your vanity, drawing crowds of admirers after you, winning hearts and breaking them! You cannot be a force in literature while you believe nothing, hope nothing, strive for nothing except to dress daintily, eat rich meals, and make all men fall in love with you."

Thus preached at, Margaret, like the spoiled child she was, experienced a certain enjoyment in the ser-

mon. She found dulness and limitation enough and to spare in her own life, but these exhortations invested it for a moment with glamour and seductiveness.

"I want you to rouse yourself," Miss Fothergill proceeded, "and to feel that you have your immortal existence to deal with; not alone your present everyday life to divide between work, pleasure, rest, and so on,—but something above and beyond all that. Now, what are you true to,—what is there in this wide world you do your duty to?"

"I really think I have done my duty to my child," retorted Margaret. "Since she was two years old I have clothed, fed, and taken care of her by my own exertions."

"What does that amount to? Why might not a mere charitable institution have done as much for her?"

Miss Fothergill's persistence began to tell upon Margaret, in whose conscience her little girl's wondering eyes had sometimes stirred presences, vague, intangible, undefined, which it was her wont to appease with a promise that the child should not be harmed by the accident of her surroundings. The thought of any possible danger to Gladys always gave Margaret a fresh impetus towards those large and lasting results she was eager to effect.

"What impressions have you given her of life," Miss Fothergill went on relentlessly, "what sanctity of permanent relations and ties, what knowledge of the real meaning of family —"

"You can hardly blame me for not having a settled career with a large family around me," said Margaret, rallying at this suggestion. "My husband has been away from me for six years; my father, mother, brother, and sisters are all dead."

"No woman should allow her husband to be away from her for six years," said Miss Fothergill. "The truth is he is not your husband at all —"

"Except by name, and in fact."

"There is no fact in the case. It is a misleading fiction. You have no husband, and it is an indignity for you to be compelled to preserve a semblance of respect for him."

"I really cannot see the use of pushing matters quite so far as that."

"If you have not a husband to whom you can be true —"

"I am true to him," cried Margaret, indignantly. "Talk as you may of my coquetry, no man has ever ventured to speak to me, even to think of me, except as a faithful and dignified wife."

A vivid emotion dyed her face, and tears gushed to her eyes.

"I never doubted that!" exclaimed Miss Fothergill, whose method of arranging clear sequences sometimes surprised her by its striking effects upon other minds. "Don't think," she went on, half-elated and half-softened by the emotion her words had excited, "don't think I would wound your feelings. But listen to me frankly for a moment. Can you really love and honor the man you call your husband?"

And do you not realize that this want of tenderness, faith, and belief in the man whom you ought to love with all your heart and soul is the influence which robs your life of high purpose and makes it mere vanity and self-display? For the worst thing about a false relation is that it hinders a true relation."

"That is clear enough," said Margaret, thoughtfully.

"Why do you not free yourself from that man? In almost any of the United States except New York the thing might be easily and comfortably arranged."

"I cannot see any possibility of comfort in it."

"Did you never think you should like to be free?" asked Miss Fothergill, imperiously.

Margaret did not answer for a moment; then she said in a low voice: "If I have, the experience has been hardly longer than a sigh for rest and relief. It was the merest passing wish. And when I have thought of it at all, my mind has overleaped all the disgusting processes by which a woman is made free, and taken in only the desirable results."

"You would have no trouble — none in the least."

"As I say, it has been a mere momentary suggestion, when I was idle and passive. And on the other hand I have often enough been glad that I was married. I have never fallen in love, and in any momentary disturbance of feeling, any dilemma which offered me an apparent alternative, I have always been able to see my path clear and straight out of all difficulty, by simply reflecting that Robert Kent is

alive, that he is my husband and the father of Gladys."

"Suppose you were to fall in love."

"That does not seem to belong to my scheme of existence. Besides, I prefer to be fallen in love with."

"That wretched spirit of levity!"

"It is better not to be tragic. Everybody cannot have your worldwide swing and see light and darkness at once. I prefer the sunshiny side."

"I should like to have you know trouble," said Miss Fothergill, frowning. "It would be bitter to me to see you suffer, for I cannot help loving you; but I want you to be brought face to face with the realities of life."

"I flatter myself I know realities very well."

"You know the materialities, which are a small part; I want you to reach a perception of something higher.

" 'Who ne'er his bread with tears has ate,
And through night's sorrow-laden hours
Weeping on bed of languor sate,
He knows you not, ye Heavenly Powers.' "

Margaret affected to shudder. She had had enough of Miss Fothergill's sermon, and now preferred to turn the conversation into a lighter vein.

"Let me tell you," she said, "that when the evil one tempts me to fling off the shackles which fasten me to Robert, he sings in quite a different voice from yours. He does not point to bread eaten with bitter tears, but says, 'Why should you strain every power, and struggle incessantly to gain the merest pittance,

when you could, by renouncing a man who shows himself habitually careless of your honor and dignity, have position, wealth, and all that is sweetest and pleasantest in life ?' And this, dear Miss Fothergill, is a much more enticing strain than yours. I confess I am heartily tired of trying to prove to the world that I am a genius." She had thrown herself back in her reclining-chair, and raised both her hands to the back of her head. The sleeves of her gown fell back, disclosing two very beautiful arms. She thus made a bewitching picture, which Miss Fothergill had the eye to appreciate, for she had an ardent taste for the beautiful, even if her application of it sometimes bordered on the grotesque. "Everybody talks of the inhumanity of mankind toward genius," Margaret went on, "but it does seem to me that the world is easily hoodwinked by the faintest sign of genius. Let one only set up to be clever and uncompromisingly proclaim his cleverness, the most dismal series of pretentious blunders will hardly undo the effect of the pose he has taken. Now, Miss Longstaffe is one of the most clear-sighted of human beings ; yet, all I have to do is to shut myself up and look rather distracted and dishevelled and she is ready to believe that I am on the point of achieving a masterpiece."

"How is your Miss Longstaffe ?" Miss Fothergill asked, with some hostility, for there was no coalition between the two.

"The same perfect being as ever — with the same knack of making everybody's wisest acts look foolish."

“And how is Gladys?”

“Gladys is the most charming creature in the world. What do you suppose she said to me this morning? I often speak before her of the stories I am writing, or thinking of writing, and she becomes interested in the characters, and occasionally asks if they are coming to luncheon or afternoon tea. So when I tell her they are not really alive she is puzzled. And to-day I was alluding to an old friend of mine, telling some anecdote connected with him, and she asked, ‘Is he really alive, mamma; or does he live in your fairy-land, with the other people?’”

Margaret had set out to entertain Miss Fothergill, and Miss Fothergill was always stifled in an atmosphere of tact and graciousness. She liked to warn, to threaten, to command, and, almost better still, she enjoyed spirited warfare when she was compelled to parry as sharp thrusts as she could give. Accordingly after yielding a grim attention to Margaret’s piquant and pretty narrations for a few moments, she took her leave, saying as she turned at the door,

“One of these days, Mrs. Kent, you will remember what I said to you this morning, and send for me to give you advice.”

CHAPTER V.

MARGARET'S DEAREST FOE.

ALMOST everyone of us has some friend, or it may be enemy, against whose prosperity we measure our own, and according to the sum of whose successes we count our individual gains or deficits. What the competitor refrains from, we must avoid at our peril, and what he does we must do or endure the consequences of lost opportunities forever after. Sometimes this rival is a being far removed from our own world, shining by the lights of a different sphere, drawing us by his example into an ampler ether, a diviner air; then again he is close beside us, instead of helping and uplifting, goading, tormenting, putting the sting of jealousy into our everyday tasks.

This was the way in which Mrs. Kent regarded Mrs. Townsend. She had begun by loving her; for Margaret, on first coming to New York, was still a little schoolgirlish and *exaltée* in her friendships, and had easily fallen a victim to the fascination of the soft manners, the delicate face, and exquisitely perfect dress of the older woman, who smiled at her enthusiasms, probed her through and through, and, discovering her to be clever and full of resources, set to work with a view of making the intimacy profitable to herself.

One could hardly tell how Margaret's eyes were gradually opened, and how she began to understand that Mrs. Townsend had not one face, but a dozen faces, and that her soft purring voice could utter cruel, damaging gossip, and even scandal about her dearest friends. Still Margaret was not wholly a guileless child of light; and when the scales fell from her eyes, and Mrs. Townsend's true character was revealed, her wisdom as a child of this world came to her aid, and she made no open sign. The acquaintance went on, adjusting itself, on Margaret's side, to some changed conditions. She had the wit and the need to use all the vantage-ground she could find; and, having been made use of by Mrs. Townsend, determined to make use of her. But Mrs. Townsend, in many directions, had resources far beyond Margaret's. To begin with, she belonged to society, or could at least command most of the advantages to be gained from society. She had lived in New York all her life, and had developed a quick instinct to discover what it was worth while to try for, and almost invariably made a happy hit. She overdid nothing; whatever she attempted, she carried out and made it tell. She had established a definite reputation as a woman who knew all the values of the various social cliques, and it was an open secret that she nowadays made a good income by writing up the week's social news and gossip for Sunday papers of the best standing. She lived in a tiny house on Thirteenth Street, which was a miracle of dainty furnishing. She gave little luncheons, little dinners, and little suppers.

She occasionally invited Margaret ; in fact she was perpetually seeking Margaret in some way. Sometimes it was to meet very grand people, from whose society Margaret carried away an impression of not belonging to the human race at all, so remote was she from the ideas and sympathies and conversation of the coterie. Then again, Mrs. Townsend, anxious to have a dinner pass off well, would ask Margaret to meet some distinguished personage, perhaps a foreigner. Mrs. Townsend was not jealous of Margaret's attractions at such times ; as hostess she was bound to furnish entertainment, and she liked a pretty woman at her table who could fascinate a clever man. Among calm, self-contained women, who sat "cool, with elevated brows," Margaret sometimes suffered ; but when she was thrown with people who could talk, her warm heart and bright artistic nature were quickly touched and roused. She divined as by magic what suited men in particular, and her charming way of meeting the genuine outcome of a man's mind was so irresistible that she always pleased. She always believed in genius if anyone showed her the faintest sign of it, and could translate what was halting and inarticulate into a sometimes brilliant revelation. All this Mrs. Townsend delighted in, although she never allowed these opportunities to gain a permanent advantage for Margaret. The distinguished strangers who had admired her went on to the next city, and the grand people who had eclipsed and bewildered her encountered her the following week with utter forgetfulness and disdain.

Margaret felt that Mrs. Townsend's influence was adverse, and she wondered why she continued to accept these invitations, which almost invariably left an afterthought of bitterness in her mind. But then Margaret had so few invitations. Her cousins, the Sinclairs, did little or nothing for her. They resented the fact of her living in New York at all, penniless, as she was, except for her own exertions, without a husband to protect her, and with no family connections but themselves. Her mother's brother, Mr. Thomas Sinclair, was dead, and his widow was puzzled and tormented to know what to do about her husband's niece, who was so different from any of themselves, so brilliant, so attractive, so uncomfortable would have been Mrs. Sinclair's word. At the outset she had not only had the best intentions, but had generously carried them out: she had given Margaret a dinner-party to introduce her, and what had been the result? Margaret in a white mull gown like a schoolgirl, with blue ribbons and a single pink rose at her throat, had fastened the attention of every man present upon herself, and the women, indignant at having the laurels of victory snatched from them, had sat fastidiously silent, smiling occasionally into each others' eyes, and lifting their eyebrows. Nobody could find any real fault with Margaret; she could not help her beauty and ease of manner, — but then the fact was patent that her husband had gone away and left her to shift for herself. And, good heavens! was not that enough? It was to poor Mrs. Sinclair a regular Chinese puzzle

that there should be people who had no money, and that a man should be on one side of the equator and his wife on the other. It was not only inconceivable to herself, but an extremely difficult matter to explain such mysteries to her friends, who looked exquisitely polite, but bored, and only said, "Oh, indeed, what a pity!" when she endeavored to make Margaret's status entirely clear.

Margaret had finally come to understand in a measure that it was only on indifferent occasions and to family dinners that she must expect invitations. Now, Margaret did not like the family dinners of the Sinclairs. They were in the habit of atoning for periodical outlays for social purposes by close-handedness on private occasions, and more than once Margaret had eaten cold mutton with her relations. "Just ourselves, you know, my dear: all ladies, and there is a potato salad and a pudding coming," poor Mrs. Sinclair would say, really mortified when they sat down to the cold joint, in which the repast of yesterday had made a frightful gap.

Margaret used to tell about the family dinner to the intimate group gathered about her fire on a stormy afternoon, and the men thought it the very best fun in the world. She cared very little what she herself ate, but she abhorred small ways, and was royally lavish to anyone who was her guest.

Mrs. Townsend's dinners suited her taste; they were both delicate and sumptuous; poetically devised and served. The airiest *nuance* of any novelty or caprice of fashion was certain to reach Mrs. Town-

send before anyone else, save the grandest people, were let into the secret of it.

"You do have invariably the very latest kink," Margaret, who toiled after similar tact and skill in vain, would say to her. And Mrs. Townsend was sure to reply,

"C'est mon métier."

Believing as she did that to go to Mrs. Townsend's dinners was a liberal education, Margaret had not the strength of mind to decline an invitation to one of them, even when she clearly understood that the clever little hostess sought her only to carry out certain ambitions of her own. Early in November Mrs. Townsend came to see Margaret about an effective dinner arrangement, concerning which she was eager. There were two desirable Englishmen in New York, and she had secured them for the 10th, and wanted Mr. Bell to meet them. She had in fact promised them that Mr. Bell should dine with them on that day, and she was ready to offer almost any bribe to Margaret to carry out this plan for her. She had in her pocket half a dozen coupons entitling the holder to two of the best seats in the parquet of the Academy of Music for a week of the opera season. She was also ready to give tickets for private views of pictures, and was prepared to offer besides other inducements, of a more personal description. Margaret required, however, no bribe for her help; for she was herself so full of interest in the project, that she would have been willing to make some considerable sacrifices for the pleasure of bringing Mr. Bell and the

two Englishmen together, and spending the evening in their company. Accordingly, Mrs. Townsend carried her ticket coupons to some more difficult market, and, only a few hours after she sent her invitation to Mr. Bell, had the satisfaction of receiving in return a note of acceptance. This emboldened her to attack Dr. Walton, whom she met on the same day, with a request that he should join the party, naming only his uncle and the English visitors as the expected guests. Dr. Walton at first demurred, not feeling certain of being in town; but when Mrs. Townsend declared her willingness to keep a chair for him, which his ghost might fill on an emergency, he too accepted, on the chance of being able to appear.

Margaret dressed for the dinner with the delight of a child; and such a radiance shone in her face as she entered Mrs. Townsend's pretty rooms, that that lady was half annoyed with her.

"My dear Margaret," she said caressingly, "you do look irresistible, but don't you think that, considering your — your position, and I may say your age — for, young as you are, you are the mother of a girl half grown up — you ought to dress in a more sober fashion?"

"Dear me!" exclaimed Margaret. "What have I got on for you to find fault with?" She paused in front of a pier-glass, and turned herself about with a half-anxious and half-luxurious survey of her shining white draperies. "If an old white silk gown made over for the fourth time is not sober and matronly enough, I don't know what is. And it's high,

too, although Englishmen always expect to see bare neck and arms in the evening."

"Well, if you call that high," said Mrs. Townsend, "your ideas of what is and what is not high differ from mine."

"I just snipped out a bit and put in some lace," said Margaret. "You would not want me to come looking like a fright."

Mrs. Townsend melted; after all, she really wished Margaret to dazzle and enchant the guests a little, and she certainly looked ravishing.

"You ought to remember to be a little more matronly," she said. "Those kittenish ways of yours belong to kittens, you know, and you may as well pass them over to Gladys, now that—"

"I am an old cat," said Margaret. "How do you do, Mrs. Bellair?" she said, going up to an elderly lady, who advanced from the parlor. "I am so glad you are to be here. Lilly is finding fault with me, and I want somebody more lenient and soft-hearted." She put her arms about Mrs. Bellair and kissed her; the tears stood in her eyes, but Mrs. Bellair did not see them.

"Lilly has been finding fault with everybody," she responded. "She was trampling on her head waiter when I came in. I will confide to you that just now I went into the dining-room, and the poor man trembled so, as I opened the door, that he almost dropped the glass he had in his hand. 'It's only me!' I explained; and do you know, he actually mumbled to himself, 'Thank God.'"

Margaret laughed.

"It is reassuring," she said, "to see that even Lilly Townsend cannot effect all her delightful results without some toilsome processes. Everything goes on here as by magic to my eyes; but I suppose she has to fight against everybody's stupidity, mine included."

"The only way is to take things easily," said Mrs. Bellair; "now, when I am giving dinner-parties, my man knows perfectly well that he is to bring me up a chop, and a bit of bread, and a glass of wine, just before I slip into my dinner-gown. It keeps me from going into little rages before the guests come in."

"That is not a bad idea," said Mrs. Townsend; "but I think even a dinner of six courses would not hinder me from being furious with Henri. Last year I used to have such a good man to wait; but he has gone back to France, and this is the best I could find; yet he cannot get an idea. However, no matter. There, it is striking seven! You know, Margaret, I am going to put Mr. Bell opposite me, and he will take in Mrs. Bellair, and you will have Mr. Chisholm, and I Sir Frederick Royce. Dr. Walton may walk in by himself."

"Is Dr. Walton coming?" cried Margaret.

"He partly promised. I fancy I should have had word if he had gone out of town."

"I have the most enormous wish to see him," murmured Margaret.

"It seems odd that, intimately acquainted with Mr. Bell as you are, you should not have met him."

"But you know he is engaged to Miss Devereux. He goes nowhere else, Mr. Bell says."

"That is really so, is it? But it is not announced. Mrs. Devereux denied it only yesterday."

In another moment three of the male guests were in the room — Mr. Bell, Sir Frederick Royce, a handsome, debonair young man, of some political prominence, and Mr. Chisholm, who, in his way, was a celebrity. He was a man of sixty, with a patient, thoughtful face, lit by fine eyes. He was excessively deliberate in speech, and while he spoke regarded his interlocutor steadily and with an expression of almost mournful earnestness. "I am glad," he remarked, when he shook hands with Mr. Bell, "that, though you live out of town, you can dine in New York."

"You see," remarked Mr. Bell, "that it is my object to combine country living with city dinners."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Chisholm, with a luminous glance. "Your suggestion is deeply interesting, for in these paradoxes we find the secret of individual preferences."

The secret of things in general was what Mr. Chisholm sought with high purpose and the utmost seriousness, but just at present what he wanted was the secret of American things in particular. He at once conceived a large faith in Mr. Bell's ability to give him this. He had observed a great deal in this new country, and to grasp his phenomena so that he might range them under the grand laws of the universe, and deduce conclusions from them in fair and logical order, was now his prime object. Sir Fred-

erick Royce was by far less serious, and, the moment they sat down at table, asked his hostess if she did not always tremble a little after inviting an Englishman to dinner.

"Tremble?" asked Mrs. Townsend, vaguely and sweetly. "Why should I tremble?"

"I fancy I know what Sir Frederick means," said Margaret. "Lest he should come in a morning-coat."

"Exactly," said Sir Frederick. "When Kelso—you know whom I mean, Kelso who was here last year—heard I was coming, he said, 'Now, Royce, mind how you dress. Americans are just the most particular people in the world about what sort of trousers you have on.'"

"Kelso came out to lunch with me and wore a flannel shirt," said Mr. Bell; "now I did not mind it the least in the world. I only wondered whether he would have done the same thing in England, in going to the house of a literary man, or whether it was intended as a delicate act of courtesy towards me, since I might feel more easy and comfortable with a guest in a flannel shirt."

"Depend upon it," said Mr. Chisholm, "that was it. Kelso is a most kind-hearted man."

"Oh, yes," said Sir Frederick, growing red to his very ears at his companion's rather odd remark. "We're awfully kind-hearted—that is, we want to be. We should like to come over here and be devilish patronizing, and all that sort of thing. But the fact is, you have improved on us. We begin to envy you. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if a hundred

years from now all you Americans were living in Europe, and all we Europeans were living over here."

"To be more exact," murmured Mr. Chisholm, "you mean our descendants."

"You have better things to eat over here than we do," went on Sir Frederick, who had Irish blood in his veins. "Possibly our mutton is better than yours, but your beef is capital. Then your canvas-backs! your venison! your terrapin! your oysters!—no doubt you can give better dinners than ours. Yes, I think we shall come over here and have a republic after you Americans have given it up and all gone to Paris."

"What will you do about your medieval castles?" asked Mrs. Townsend. "You will not like our cramped little houses."

"They are precisely what we shall like. After keeping up a castle for a few years, you would be willing to dispense with medievalism. I prefer modern coats and trousers to a suit of armor."

Dr. Walton had come and slipped into his place between Mrs. Bellair and the hostess. He had already seen all the men that day, and nodded to them. He was not introduced to Margaret, at whom he looked nevertheless, and allowed his eyes to rest on her. Mr. Chisholm and Mr. Bell were talking across her, and she was listening to Sir Frederick, who went on eating his dinner with a prodigious appetite, talking all the while about his impressions of America. He admired everything, not only what Americans

prided themselves upon, but what the initiated among them did not consider first-rate.

"We imitate you all we can," said Margaret. "It is only fair that you should praise us."

"Don't say that you imitate us," Mr. Chisholm now remarked, looking kindly at Margaret, "but that, as we both try to have the best and loveliest ideals, we accept the same standard, and the best Americans are precisely like the best English people."

"That is what I say," said Mrs. Townsend. "The really best people are just alike anywhere."

"They may be in the Kingdom of Heaven," said Margaret, laughing, "but on earth I cannot help thinking that Americans fail in certain nice and delicate gradations. But we try to improve. Did you hear the story of the bishop who was over here last year?"

"The Bishop of Aldegonda? I know him, but I don't know the story."

"He was staying with the St. Johns, who are as English as the deteriorating influence of a republic will allow, and they especially trained a new servant to attend on his lordship. The man was to take hot water, etc., to the bishop's room in the morning. He was to stand outside tapping softly, oh! so very softly, until the bishop should awake; and then, when his lordship should ask, 'Who is there?' he was to reply, 'Me~~y~~ lord, the boy.' The first morning he did tap softly, oh! so very softly, at the door, and the bishop did ask, 'Who is there?' but, oh! what the servant answered was, 'Me~~y~~ boy, the Lord.'"

Mr. Chisholm probably wondered why the others laughed at this trivial mistake of a domestic; for he did not smile, only said: —

“It is very difficult sometimes to train new servants.”

Margaret's eyes, dancing with mirth, met Dr. Walton's; then she remembered that she had not been introduced to him, and looked away, growing rosy to her hair. She had her little shynesses and alarms, which startled her conscience on occasions, frightening her with a sense of enormous faults blindly committed. She now felt convicted of boldness; she repented telling the story, remembering that it was considered not the best taste for a woman to tell amusing stories. Especially overwhelming was it to remember that out of the whole tableful to whom she might have turned to show her irrepressible amusement at Mr. Chisholm's deficient sense of humor, she had chosen the one with whom she had no right to exchange a glance. She remembered with a swelling heart Mrs. Townsend's strictures upon her conduct. She resolved not to offend again, and turned to Mr. Chisholm and Mr. Bell, summoning all her resources to the task of drawing them out. Mr. Chisholm was ready enough to talk. He was a good deal surprised at what he saw in America, and had been looking forward to meeting Mr. Bell with the hope of getting the clews from him to certain mysteries. Did Americans read, he asked. Mr. Bell was not sure.

“You read a little, Mrs. Kent,” said he. “You

ought to answer Mr. Chisholm. I read, but then there is little else for a man of my age to do."

"You belong to the generation which used to feel the need of learning," said Mr. Chisholm, with his grand, serious air. "I address myself to you, Mrs. Kent; do Americans read?"

"They know how to read," said Margaret, with her quaint, childlike smile, "but I could never see that the educated classes read."

This paradox interested Mr. Chisholm, and kept him and Mr. Bell eager in talk until the conclusion of the meal. Dr. Walton had not a chance to meet Mrs. Kent's eyes again, although he looked at her and listened to her, until she left the table with the other ladies. He looked forward to the gathering about the tea-table in the drawing-room, as an opportunity of being presented to her in due form by his uncle or the hostess, and to his chagrin found that they had talked English politics so long in the dining-room, that Mrs. Bellair had been obliged to go, and had offered to take Margaret in her carriage and drop her on the way.

"I am so sorry I could not keep her," said Mrs. Townsend, "but Margaret soon begins to yawn among a party of ladies. I couldn't induce her to stay."

"I suppose she was glad to have Mrs. Bellair take care of her," remarked Mr. Bell.

"She's a beautiful creature," said Sir Frederick. "I shall hope to meet her again. Handsomest woman I've seen in America."

"She seems to me a transcendently sensible woman," said Mr. Chisholm. "That is, she apprehends and interprets the facts of human life. She understands without effort, and without making it necessary to bridge over the gulf between her mind and one's own."

"Everything comes easily to dear Margaret," remarked Mrs. Townsend. "If everything goes as easily, one cannot blame her."

Dr. Walton and the two Englishmen had another engagement, and made their adieux.

"Somebody told me either Mrs. Townsend or Mrs. Kent had a husband somewhere," said Sir Frederick, who delighted in gossip, the moment they were out of the house, "and, hang it, I was afraid all the evening to make any allusion to the marriage tie; for I couldn't be sure which one it was."

"It is Mrs. Townsend who has a husband shut up somewhere. He is an amiable monomaniac on some subject, I have been told. Mrs. Kent is a widow," was Dr. Walton's reply.

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes; I've heard my uncle speak of her a thousand times. I fancy her husband died before she was twenty."

"She hardly looks over that now. On my word, if she's free, she must have plenty of men dangling after her. I don't know when I've seen a woman more alive."

"You're a married man, I think," said Dr. Walton, laughing a little at the other's fervent tone.

"Oh, yes. We have some children already. You are engaged to be married, I believe, so Mrs. Kent is *fruit défendu* to you too."

"I'm not engaged to be married."

"Come, now!"

"On my word, I'm not!"

"Have I put my foot in it? Somebody told me you were to be married shortly."

"That is a mistake. My life has had nothing continuous hitherto. I have lived for the day only."

"All I can say is, your freedom gives you a fine opportunity. I should like to explore the whole secret of the heart of a woman like Mrs. Kent,— a widow with a face like that."

"You make me ambitious," said Dr. Walton. It was Mr. Chisholm who changed the subject, which had a certain fascination for the two younger men.

Mr. Bell had lingered a little, taking a second cup of tea with Mrs. Townsend.

"I feel a little guilty about Margaret's going so soon," Mrs. Townsend was saying. "I bored her a little by preaching sermons to her. She is so pretty, so winning, that her little escapades try my patience the more."

"Escapades!" repeated Mr. Bell.

"I scolded her a little about some of her pretty audacities," Mrs. Townsend went on. "One scolds her because one loves her. Such beauty makes one forgive a great many faults, but then such faults require a great deal of beauty to carry them off."

Mr. Bell was disturbed. He half resolved to ques-

tion Mrs. Townsend, but he did not trust her. He regretted that he had come to her dinner; and took his leave with an added stateliness of manner, which somewhat awed the mischief-making hostess. He was not soon to recover from the effect of the insinuations she had thrown out. Their effect, however, was not to make him distrust Margaret, but to make him long to isolate her, guard her and protect her against the malice and uncharitableness of the great wicked world.

CHAPTER VI.

A MATINÉE MUSICALE.

It had not occurred to Margaret while the dinner was in progress, that it was an especially delightful occasion ; but looked at in memory, and talked over next day, it set her to envying Mrs. Townsend's advantages. She too would like, she declared, to give little dinners and suppers.

"From what you tell me about Lilly Townsend's affair, it must have cost enormously," said Miss Longstaffe. "We couldn't afford to give even one dinner without feeling pinched with poverty for months to come. That woman makes no end of money by her newspaper articles. Don't be such a little fool as to dream of vying successfully with her. Take the goods the gods provide you. What more do you want? I really consider that you have all the comfort of good society, with none of its drawbacks. Lilly Townsend has to hunt up her lions, endure disappointments and rebuffs, and, almost worse still, she has all the expense and anxiety of providing entertainment for them. You can sit still and have poets, artists, and all the fashionable young men you want, dropping in whenever you are obliging enough to stay at home on an afternoon."

"If I knew more women, I could have a reception," said Margaret, thoughtfully. "Receptions do not cost much."

"But you don't know women. That is our weak point. Women do not take to us."

"Mrs. Bellair seems to like me. I wonder why she never comes to call," said poor Margaret. "I wonder if Lilly Townsend pays her anything for going to her house."

"Nonsense. All women seem to like Mrs. Townsend."

That was one of poor Margaret's thorns. Mrs. Townsend could pick and choose. She was frequently asked to chaperon sweet, sacred, charming girls to rehearsals and concerts, even to the opera; just the sort of girls Margaret would have rejoiced to know—to flatter, to caress, to point out to Gladys, and bid her to grow up to be like them. Margaret's intellect was stimulated by men, but her real everyday fondness was for intimate society among her own sex. She was essentially feminine in all her instincts: she loved sewing and housewifery; to talk over gowns was her delight, and discussing new fashions for the hair a real excitement. She was never so happy as when making Gladys frocks and trying them on.

Ten days after her dinner Mrs. Townsend gave an afternoon reception, and Margaret could not shake off her longing to do something like it. She was pursued in her dreams by night and her thoughts by day with the desire to imitate and perhaps surpass

her dearest foe, who had all New York bowing before her and filling up her rooms for three mortal hours. And, strange to say, in that miraculous way which had brought so many unexpected events to pass in her life, something happened just at this time which brought the coveted ball to Margaret's feet. Early in November, Mlle. Donati, or, in other words, Miss Mary Newton, of Alabama, was brought over from Paris with an Italian opera troupe, with an engagement to sing in *Faust*, *Lucia*, *Linda*, and other operas, at the New York Academy of Music. Mlle. Donati was an old friend and schoolmate of Margaret, who rushed at once to see her, to renew old associations and compare their present careers. Mlle. Donati had a story and a grievance to tell. The impresario had so far paid her no money, had passed her over in favor of a young German prima donna who had surprised him by taking with the public, and she herself had had no chance to be heard. She owed him a grudge, and burned to achieve some success without him, and instantly begged Margaret to make up a little party and invite her to sing at it.

Margaret not only felt for her friend, but recognized her opportunity, and threw herself heart and soul into the enterprise. Charlton lent an ear at once, and was glad enough to be her ally, and to bring his mother into the conspiracy. Mrs. Charlton was a musical enthusiast, and dearly loved a protégée. The great lady took up the singer's cause at once with an enthusiasm which left nothing to be desired. People must see and hear her—such charm, such

sweetness, such a voice ! Positively a veritable princess of the stage ! All the world would recognize her powers, and rush to pay her homage, and she might make her own terms with the stupid manager. Mrs. Charlton sat down with her son and Margaret to write out the list of guests. She begged at first that she might give the musicale at her own house. But on that point the other two stood firm, and Mrs. Charlton not only yielded, but determined to throw her whole weight into the scale and make Margaret sure of success. Only seventy-five people were to be asked, and to choose these seventy-five out of Mrs. Charlton's visiting-list was a proceeding which almost terrified Margaret, while it afforded Charlton the most unmixed amusement. There were at least six contestants to a single ticket, and the fine wheat which must be blown away as chaff would have made a splendid feast for a different occasion. All that Mrs. Charlton wanted were the actual social leaders — the opinion-makers. Her own card was to accompany Margaret's, and she was, besides, to see half a dozen of the most prominent ladies herself, and ensure their presence. There was to be nothing set, starched, tedious, about the affair. The guests were to come between four and six, and three times during those two hours Mlle. Donati was to sing. Tea, chocolate, and perhaps ices, were to be handed about, and the affair might be as informal and social as the hostesses had the tact to make it.

Together with her satisfaction Margaret experienced a wonderful sweetness and humility when the

day of her triumph came. She was so glad to be in the current of things; she had hungered and thirsted to know pleasant people, and to be taken for what she was. Life — no matter what burdens it imposed — would be precious to her, if she could only have friends at whom she could look, and by whom she could be recognized, in time. She had struggled against the feeling that she was misapprehended; for it always made her angry, — almost reckless enough to abet those who misapprehended her, by doing what they believed her capable of.

“I could be such a good woman,” she said to herself; “not like Becky Sharpe, who wanted five thousand a year, — but if I had plenty of warm women friends whom I loved and believed in.”

She could believe in her male friends to-day; for every man of them had sent her beautiful and rare exotic plants, besides stacks of cut flowers. She dressed her rooms prettily, but determined above all things to avoid ostentation. She had looked up three rosy-cheeked maids who were to serve Pinard's chocolate and ices, while a diminutive boy in buttons was to open the street door. Gladys was dressed in a white embroidered slip, and Miss Longstaffe's black gown was set off by rich frills of lace and a diamond-studded arrow which Mr. Bell had given Margaret on her last birthday. On the question of her own toilette Margaret deliberated long, then put on a simply-made dress of dark blue velvet, a little worn and faded, but fitting marvellously to her perfect figure. Mrs. Townsend was the first to arrive.

"Upon my word," she exclaimed, "you can find no fault with New York society to-day. Those who are not coming here are all dying to come."

"I do not flatter myself it is to see me."

"Oh, you have managed it all very cleverly. How did you contrive to get hold of Mrs. Charlton? By your influence over her son, I suppose."

"My own idea is that Mrs. Charlton got hold of me. All the arrangements, all the invitations, are hers. I only happened to know Mlle. Donati. We are old friends. She went to Europe to study music just at the time I came north."

But Mrs. Townsend's interest did not centre in the cantatrice whom she had been engaged, on the most liberal terms, to write up, by Roger Charlton himself. She inquired instead about all the little arrangements, with pertinacity and zeal.

"I should not be in the least surprised at your having a famous success after this, Margaret dear," she said.

"Success after this? I expect nothing but the deluge hereafter; but no matter. How did you like my page? I dressed him myself."

"The drollest little cherub; and Gladys looks like a picture. Come and kiss me, dear."

"Miss Longstaffe is my chef d'œuvre. Is she not distinguished? I declare, I do really believe such a presence as hers would carry off a powwow with éclat. I'm going to introduce Mr. Chisholm to her."

"Is he coming? How that man does go everywhere! Is Dr. Walton to be here?"

"He had a card, but I fancy he is in Philadelphia.

He is always in Philadelphia. There is a congress of microscopists, I believe, and he is the chief of them."

Then Mrs. Charlton arrived, bringing Mlle. Donati; and it was not long before the staircase felt the incoming surge of the social tide, and the two rooms were full of voices. Mrs. Charlton introduced everybody to Margaret, who bowed with a soft, happy light in her eyes. Very great social magnates sat down or stood about, in the very best humor. A group formed about Gladys, who received their admiration and caresses with a lofty, serious air. Miss Longstaffe herself enjoyed quite an ovation; and when Mlle. Donati opened her lips and began, "Ah! non giunge," she sang it quite well enough to please a roomful of people who were already pleased. Then the ices were so delicious and so refreshing, everybody affirmed,—served, too, just at the right moment. All the little arrangements were so pretty and so unpretentious, it was altogether an artistic *ensemble*. Mrs. Kent was declared to be a really beautiful picture; and it was quite enough to have her to look at and to watch, especially when she glanced up and spoke to Mr. Bell, with that soft brilliance in her eyes, and that lovely, childlike smile.

"She understands how to look at men of all ages," said Mrs. Townsend, with *her* smile; "I do consider it as adorably good-natured of Mrs. Charlton to help her with this; for when one knows the extent of Roger's infatuation —"

Everybody was ready to listen and to surmise more

than they heard. Roger Charlton's disaffection to society in general was recognized as something unworthy of a young man of his position. Mrs. Townsend would say no more about Charlton, but remarked that the Updegraeffs, besides, both George and Tom, were great allies of Mrs. Kent's; and people began to look round the room with a new sort of curiosity, and to whisper to each other all they knew or could guess.

"Who do you suppose paid for those flowers?" Mrs. Townsend asked, laughing.

Mr. Bell had come in, and was glad enough to see the success of Margaret's little musicale.

"I suppose you are too proud to speak to an old friend like me," he had said, as he put out his hand to the hostess. "I see that all your dreams have come to pass."

Margaret laughed. "I will try these new friends a year and a day before I decide that it is safe to give you up," she replied.

"There is a grain of comfort in that. But that is not the fashion of this world. Has my nephew been heard from?"

"No; I hoped he might be coming."

"He wrote me from Philadelphia two days ago, and said he meant to meet me here."

"He may come yet; Miss Devereux's mother is in the other room."

Mr. Bell moved on, and spoke first to one, then to another of the women who composed the chief groups. They all exhausted themselves in enthusiastic praise

of Mrs. Kent — so beautiful, so distinguished, such charming manners. She must have come from one of the old cavalier families, or have married into one; for the little girl was actually *très grande dame*.

"But where is her husband?" asked old Mrs. Rogers, whose daughters had run the whole gamut, made a thousand scandals, and whose granddaughters were the fastest girls in society. "I like these beautiful young women to have husbands."

"She has got one," Mr. Bell answered dryly; "only he happens to do business in South America instead of in New York."

"Oh, I hear they haven't lived together for years. Such a pretty woman ought to be looked after."

Mr. Bell moved on. He saw at once behind the splendors of poor little Margaret's apparent successes, and that this affair would bring her no sure friends. He felt galled and discouraged by his own powerlessness to enthrone her where she should be. He had felt old of late, and had experienced a mortal fatigue both of body and spirit. Miss Longstaffe's little sermon had made him pause and try to analyze his own motives in wishing to free Margaret; and the fear that he might be acting selfishly took the force from his resolution and the efficacy from his thought.

He stood thinking this over when Mrs. Townsend came up to him.

"Is not this a delightful occasion for dear Margaret?" she said, with her pretty, effusive air. "It is so nice in Mrs. Charlton to have carried it through,

and brought all the world here. In my little way I have tried to introduce Margaret, but of course I cannot alter social laws nor influence social leaders."

Mr. Bell looked at her steadily. He disliked the woman.

"I hardly think Mrs. Kent is ambitious of social distinction," he answered deliberately. "She is a very hard-working woman; it is cruel to think how hard she has to work to keep a pleasant home for herself and Gladys."

"Does she work hard?" said Mrs. Townsend, incredulously. "I fancied she had so many rich friends that — One knows very well about Mr. Charlton's devotion —"

Mr. Bell's face grew grim.

"I supposed you were her friend, madame," said he. "At least, I advise you to remember that you are her guest." He knew now whose influence was at work. He turned on his heel. He was too old to care to hide his contempt for her and his pain for himself. He was about to walk straight out of the room, when he came across little Gladys, and sat down instead, and took her on his knee.

"And how do you like these new-fashioned parties of splendid ladies?" he asked her.

"Oh, I like whatever mamma likes. And the ices are so sweet and cold; I eat one every time they come around."

"Oh, I see. You are like the rest of the world, — carried away by fashion. You would like to give parties every day?"

"Oh, dear, no. I keep thinking to myself, 'By and by it will all be over, and the house will be still.'"

"You like the house to be still?"

"Yes, so still I can hear the clock tick and the fire burn. For I love to listen to the voices."

"What voices?"

"Oh, the voices — the voices in the air. The voices that speak and tell me things."

"They speak to you out of the silence, do they? And what do they tell you?"

"All sorts of things," said Gladys, smiling and dimpling, but with a far-off look in her eyes. "They talk about what I am doing, and what I am going to do. Sometimes they tell about you; then I can see you sitting in your red chair, with the firelight shining over your face and your hair."

"There are no voices this afternoon, telling you dreams and showing you pictures."

"No, it is all buzz — buzz — buzz!"

"I am going away now. Tell your mamma, with my love, that I shall come again soon."

Mr. Bell put Gladys down, but she did not let go his hand, and walked with him to the top of the staircase. She continued to stand looking after her old friend, who had kissed her good-bye and vanished in the vestibule, wishing that she need not go back into the crowded parlors. All at once, while she waited, a few chords were struck on the piano, and Mlle. Donati began to sing again. She sat down on the edge of the niche, which held a tall palm to-day, and

waited for the song to be done. She liked it better here than inside. The "eternal passion, eternal pain," of music always smote the child's sensibilities, and now she trembled at the unwonted tones, and tears rose to her eyes. A faint but restless feeling of anxiety always lay at the bottom of her consciousness, a dread of something to happen which should make her mother suffer; and it seemed to her that the music gave a voice to this. She sighed heavily when the last note had died away. At this moment the door below opened, and a gentleman was admitted, and moved slowly up the stairs, hat in hand. He stopped short at sight of the little figure on the landing.

"Let me see," he said; "I have had a glimpse of you before, have I not? You were in my uncle's woods that day."

"Yes, Dr. Walton."

"You remember me, then?"

"Yes; you were with a beautiful dog and a young lady."

Dr. Walton laughed. When he laughed he showed a flash of his white teeth beneath his short dark moustache, and it lighted up his rather serious face.

"You remember the dog best."

"Oh, yes; but I remember you, too, and I remember the young lady. She went on as fast as she could, and she called the dog away from me, and you had to go on with her. Mr. Bell said she was in a great hurry. He would have liked to introduce you to mamma."

"Is Mr. Bell inside?"

"He has just gone away."

"How unlucky! But you know me well enough to introduce me to your mamma, do you not?"

"Oh, dear, yes. Besides, she knows you already."

"What is your name?"

"Gladys Kent."

"Gladys Kent," he repeated. His impulse was to kiss her, but there was an artless serenity about the child which he did not dare to disturb. Mlle. Donati had meanwhile been singing, with great effect, "*Istorie belle a leggere*;" but it was now over, and it became apparent that the guests had risen and were making their adieux.

"Can't I get out of their way?" said Dr. Walton, and he stepped into a little alcove beyond the landing, which led to the other part of the house. He was swift as his thought, but Mrs. Townsend, ubiquitous as ever, stood on the threshold, and contrived to see and recognize him, and when she advanced into the hall she took pains to certify her impression. There was a chorus of voices; carriages were loudly called and more loudly announced. The staircase billowed with silks and velvets. Everybody was taking leave at once; and while the tide swept past him, Dr. Walton stood in the recess biting his lips and laughing to himself at his novel position. Having once voluntarily assumed it, he could not extricate himself without awkwardness and embarrassment. It reminded him of some absurd scene

in a play. The time seemed endless before he heard the final clang of the street door and the simultaneous sound of Gladys' voice,

"Now, Dr. Walton, they are all gone."

He emerged, laughing. "Hadn't I better go, too?" he asked, rather ruefully. "Mrs. Kent may not fancy such a late intrusion. Did you tell your mother I was here?"

"Oh, no."

Gladys led the way into the deserted parlors.

"Mamma," said she, "here is Dr. Walton."

Margaret had thrown herself into an easy-chair before the fire, and was leaning forward, her white hands crossed on her knees. Alex Walton had thought often of her of late, but now his first impressions were to yield to a new picture of Margaret, which, sleeping or waking, was to be with him for many a day to come. She rose with an almost childlike radiance of surprise.

"Why, Dr. Walton," she exclaimed, "how late you are!" She came towards him swiftly, holding out her hand.

"Your uncle was here," she went on, "and said he expected to find you, and went away very soon because you did not keep your promise. It is too bad that you have lost all the guests and all the music."

"But then what I wanted was to meet you, Mrs. Kent," said Dr. Walton, smiling but a little confused.

"To meet me?" repeated Margaret, archly.

"You will not believe that I have been anxious

to meet you? I was greatly disappointed to find that you were gone away when I came out from dinner at Mrs. Townsend's. And twice my uncle has fixed a time to bring me here, when I had to break the engagement. I have been in Philadelphia for weeks now, only finding myself free to run on here for a few hours at a time. I was there to-day at three o'clock, and I must be there again early to-morrow, yet here I am."

"I call it extremely good of you."

"Do you? But let me tell you, Mrs. Kent, that even before I was introduced to you I was already enchanted that I had come; for your daughter, Miss Gladys Kent, has made a deep impression upon my heart."

Singular to relate, this allusion to the child gave Margaret an actual pang.

"Gladys generally spoils my friends so that they do not care for me," she said. "But here comes Miss Longstaffe; let me introduce you to her."

Miss Longstaffe bowed, but seemed to be looking for something.

"What is it, Sarah?" asked Margaret, who then perceived that Gladys also was on the search.

"Mrs. Townsend has come back to find her vinaigrette, mamma," said the little girl.

But, when it could not be found instantly that clever little lady hurried away; what she had wanted was a clew to Dr. Walton's meaning in hiding in the entry; and, having found it, her imagination—or

rather, perhaps, her inductive faculty — jumped the hiatus, filling up the logical gap with causes and motives she could understand.

Margaret had been frankly indifferent to the incident of Mrs. Townsend's intrusion. She and her visitor had seated themselves on opposite sides of the fire, and Dr. Walton was asking questions about the success of Mlle. Donati's first appearance, and everybody's impressions concerning her. Margaret understood in five minutes that Dr. Walton knew little or nothing about herself, her circumstances, or her position. It was to him quite a matter of course that she should have had the best people in New York in her little rooms. He seemed inclined to treat her as if she were a proud, exclusive woman, with an established habit of supremacy in the social world. From anyone else this would have aroused some swift play of satire or sarcasm; she would have taken delight in telling the real story of the musicale, not only giving the ins and outs of its history, but embellishing it with little touches to set off every inconsistency and incongruity in this *caprice des grandes dames* from which she had derived a passing *éclat*. Her eye and mind were never unobservant, and both had been busy that afternoon treasuring up a hundred effective suggestions of character and personality which she would have been ready enough to make humorous use of to Charlton or the Updegraeffs. But with Dr. Walton regarding her, his serious brown eyes fixed on her face, she longed ardently to be the thing he believed her to be. To jeopardize his absolute respect

by levity or bad taste was something to dread as she had rarely dreaded anything in her life. She told herself she had it in her to be the kind of woman who might please this man; she had committed follies, but they were the sort of follies which may be retrieved by study, prayer, and feminine subtilities.

Gladys, watching her mother jealously, felt some change in her. Her voice was more soft, she did not laugh, and her smile was almost pathetic in the droop it gave her lips. Her face changed from pale to red and from red to pale, and the child feared she might be ill. She crept towards Margaret and put her arms about her neck. Thus seen together, mother and child made a picture from which the visitor could not withdraw his eyes. Nothing in art, nothing in nature, touched him like the pictures to be seen everywhere — in palace, in cottage, along the roadside, in the frescoes of lofty basilicas, and on the walls of famous galleries — of a young mother with a child. At this moment Margaret was far from thinking of her little girl at all, but it was more natural to have the small soft cheek against hers than to be without it; for night and day, asleep or awake, the tender hands were wont to clasp and unclasp hers, and the warm arms to cling and uncling around her neck. Her actual predominating thought was that this too short moment would soon be over, that Dr. Walton would be going away to see Miss Devereux. In reality he was blushing at his boyish infatuation, which kept him nailed to his chair.

"You see," he said finally, with a visible wrench

away from the pleasant fireside, "it is as if we were old friends, is it not? I cannot remember conventionalities in the least. I feel inclined to sit here and talk endlessly."

Margaret smiled at him shyly; she wanted to speak and say, "Do sit here and talk endlessly," but Miss Longstaffe was looking at her.

"Uncle Bert has spoken to me about you," he went on. "We are not strangers."

She shook her head. He came nearer to her.

"What are you going to do to-night?" he asked. "Shall you be at Mrs. Trowbridge's?"

"Oh, no," said Margaret sadly, feeling that her enchanted hour was over — that he would go back into his own world and meet his own set of people. "I never go to parties. We have a box at the theatre to-night."

"Which theatre?"

"The Union Square."

"May I drop in to see you there?" Dr. Walton asked, with a direct glance into her eyes, and a half smile.

She assented with a vivid blush. She could not hold her own against that strong gaze; her own eyes drooped.

CHAPTER VII.

A BREAKFAST-TABLE TALK.

DR. WALTON spent every moment that the play lasted in talking to Margaret.

"Do you care about that stupid melodrama?" he asked her twice. Margaret cared nothing about the play; what she cared for was to talk to him; still she was vaguely troubled, and clutched at her present happiness, feeling that it was a mistake, which something must presently hinder and frustrate. She was oppressed, too, in a certain measure, by the sight of Miss Longstaffe's grim face turning back now and then to threaten her with a frown or a shake of the head. What Margaret was wholly indifferent to was the fact that Roger Charlton, who had paid for the box, sat pale as a ghost all the evening, sucking the top of his cane, and apparently noticing nothing which went on, — neither the play and its scenery, nor Miss Longstaffe, who sat beside him, nor the couple who had retired into the curtained recesses and who talked on interminably.

Both Charlton and Miss Longstaffe might have listened to the low-voiced conversation. Dr. Walton was telling Margaret about his new book, and his present occupation in Philadelphia. All that there

was startling about the confidences he poured out was the fact of his making them at all. But there was an extraordinary pressure upon him to tell this woman something about himself. There was little of the temper of a graceful looker-on in Alex Walton. He was rarely satisfied with the part of a spectator, invariably preferring the view from the inside. Whatever others were doing he longed to do, and the inactivity of paying attention to the changes of a mere play, when he might absorb and elicit ideas from a fellow-being, seemed to him a foolish waste of time. Yet as a rule he cared little or nothing about feminine ideas. He admired women, conceded them an ample place in the world, but took pains to separate as chief enemies their requisitions upon him from his own upon himself. Mr. Bell had not only spoken to his nephew about Margaret, but had written him many times concerning her while he was abroad. But until Alex had seen the woman herself, under the chestnut tree, with Gladys, everything about her had fallen upon dull ears. He knew indefinitely that she had literary ambition, that she wrote for magazines,—stories, poems, what not; it had not occurred to him that she made an effort in this way to gain a living; he attributed such enterprise to the dominant impulse to do something, no matter how badly, which afflicts the modern female mind. It was a circumstance to disgust his fastidiousness that a woman should be an author at all. He did not wish his own active, inquisitive spirit shadowed forth in the intellect towards which he bent

for change and recreation. He considered that a woman's mind should be a fascinating mystery, its prettinesses and clevernesses not written down, printed, labelled, and offered to any chance buyer with a few shillings in his pocket, but veiled, like the Egyptian Isis, from the eyes of men. So far as his imagination had lent itself to create his ideal of a woman, it had rested on that type which found its choicest expression in Miss Devereux. Up to the present time Alex Walton had been a purely rational being, and had had from his boyhood the clearest sense of the true proportions of life—the relative values of its duties, interests, and emotions. Even in his impetuous youth he had never given himself up to any pursuit which ran counter to his views of what was reasonable and right for anyone possessed of intellect and will. He had decided that while a man is putting forth all his powers for hard and remorseless study, he should not assume responsibilities which would hamper his free play; that is, he should postpone marriage until he has matured his intellect and accomplished something for the world. He was now no longer wholly merged in his work; he had written a book, which already before it was published was sufficiently well known to give him the place he coveted among scientific and medical men. Hence it was strictly logical for him to have thought, during the past six months, of marriage. He had known Miss Devereux from a child, then had met her the winter before in Vienna, and renewed his acquaintance. He had repeatedly said to himself that

it would be a sensible thing to marry her, but he had made her no offer, and was far from being as deeply committed to her as the social world declared him to be.

After first seeing Margaret, without even hearing her voice, he found himself haunted by her face, with its upturned eyes, its sweet, imperturbable smile. He denied the worth of this impression until he met her at dinner and heard her speak. It was then he told himself that it was no mere caprice of fancy which made these glimpses of Margaret leave such a strange sense of beauty in his memory. Her face and smile haunted him perpetually with a vivid gleam of almost unearthly loveliness. Certainly, if merely looking at a woman could move him like this, he ought to test her real power over him by seeking her and trying to find out the secret of her charm. There could be no question about the reality of the attraction he had found in her the moment he met her. But at this point, in order to avoid mistakes, we must chronicle anew a vital fact. Everything his uncle had said to him about the trials of Margaret's position had misled him. He thought her husband was dead. His mind was as definitely at rest upon the subject of her being a widow as if he himself had known of Robert Kent's death years before. Thus, as we have seen, no check was laid upon his first spontaneous fancy.

Margaret woke next morning with a feeling that the day before had been the first in a new and illuminated calendar. Dr. Walton had gone back to Phil-

adelphia by the midnight train, and would not be in New York again for weeks to come; and she was glad.

"He could not have seen Miss Devereux even for a moment," she remarked to Miss Longstaffe at breakfast, with a sort of glee.

"You ought hardly to feel proud of an achievement like that—keeping a man away from the woman he is engaged to."

"Did I do anything to keep him? Did I do anything more than send him a card to the musicale? I no more expected him to come in the way he did than I expected an angel to come down from heaven. But he came, and he stayed, and he came again to see me at the theatre. Did I invite him? By look, manner, word, did I invite him? No, let me have my one poor little triumph, Sarah,—I pleased him without making the least effort for it."

"You pleased him because you yourself were radiantly pleased," declared Miss Longstaffe, with a sort of indignation.

"How could I help being pleased? I couldn't define what Dr. Walton's superiority is, but he eclipses every man I have ever seen."

"You should not show your feelings so plainly. You are a married woman, and Dr. Walton is, as you are perfectly well aware, engaged to Miss Devereux."

Margaret was eager, intent, indisposed to yield, but she laughed all the time she spoke.

"That completely justifies us both in being pleased with each other," she retorted. "Were I a young girl, with the untried world before me—to my

crude belief a land of miracles existing for me and only me — meeting an engaged man might be something to tremble at if I were too much pleased with him. But I am not a young girl. The world is not before me, and I have learned my lesson. The great prizes are not within my reach. I go past the counters gorgeous with silks and satins, to buy my poor little remnants at the other end of the shop; I eat my plain, wholesome bread instead of the cakes and bonbons I see in the confectioners' windows; and when ripe Hesperidean apples wave golden above me, do I long for them? Do I make myself wretched reaching up for them in vain? Do I not rather leave them hanging for my betters?"

Miss Longstaffe's grim face relaxed a little. If Margaret were actually as sensible and cheery and unconscious as she seemed, ought *she* to be the one to put doubt and discontent and heartache into this sunny clearness of mind?

"All the same, you generally have silks and satins, cakes and confectionery," she affirmed. "And as for leaving certain things beyond your reach for your betters — I doubt if you would be willing to confess you have any betters."

"Oh, I am not proud. I know my superiors when I see them, and I went down on the instant before Miss Devereux. She gave me one little glance, and I felt all my poverty and all my humiliations — all my makeshifts and all my hopeless failures. She has always had the whole piece to cut into, while I have had to contrive out of the odds and ends."

"And now I dare say you consider it a part of her phenomenal good fortune that she is to have Dr. Walton for a husband."

"Yes," answered Margaret lazily. "Still, I am not sure that I begrudge him to her. She will never know just what a man he is, for she never could believe in or care for anything except herself. Still, any woman might be proud of such a husband." The two had been sitting an hour over their breakfast of coffee and rolls without butter, and Margaret now brought a bowl of hot water and began to wash the china. "He would make her tremble at times," she remarked as she went on rubbing a blue-dragon cup. "Cæsar's nicety about women was only a pretence compared with his. His wife will have to defer to his judgment in every respect."

"I will risk Miss Devereux. She will be managed by nobody, not even by Dr. Walton."

Margaret shook her head. "It might be he would not care enough about her to insist. But I tell you he is an indomitable man. Whatever he says or does governs me. 'Sit there,' he says, and I sit there. 'Tell me what you think of it,' he says, and I tell him. Now, I myself prefer to play the part of centurion. There may be some slight piquancy in being ordered about in that way for an occasional experience, but as a permanent condition of things it would be quite unbearable. Such subjugation to a superior mind makes a woman understand the solid comfort she gets out of the devotion of men like Roger Charlton and Tom Updegraff. No, I will not waste my heart

in vain longings for Miss Devereux' lover. He is too good for me, too high-minded. You and he would suit very well. You live on the same plane of thought and of effort to do and be the best."

"I and Dr. Walton!" ejaculated Miss Longstaffe. "We should no doubt suit exquisitely—exquisitely."

"But all the same," pursued Margaret, putting the coffee-cups on a hanging cabinet, and then standing still, clasping her hands on her breast and speaking with a soft vehemence of look and tone, "when I think of a man like Dr. Walton, I realize that I have missed what is most splendid in life. If I could have known people like him years ago, my longing for the heroic in life might have resulted in something better than my beggarly achievements. Ever since I first saw Mr. Bell I have had glimpses of what I might have been and ought to have been. It is so sickening to think of the havoc ignorance and folly may make in a woman's history. I began by being unscrupulous and daring. I wanted to experiment in everything, never realizing how generations of profound and disciplined minds had gone on acquiring knowledge concerning all the important questions of human life. When I used to talk to my father he would turn shudderingly away and beg me to desist. Robert would laugh at my notions, admiring me for what seemed to him the bravado of the thing. Nobody answered me in a way to make my folly and effrontery clear, or tried to bring my insight and my powers into harmony with the facts of everyday existence. I actually used to believe that I was more

clever and far-seeing than other people. Yet all the while men like Mr. Bell and Dr. Walton were to be found, full of intellectual and moral culture, always choosing the best — indifferent to lower forms of enjoyment. Oh, I have lost a great deal."

"Dr. Walton has made you very serious," said Miss Longstaffe.

"No, the seriousness is always in me, although you may not believe it," said Margaret, in a different tone. "I often lie awake at night and think these things over. What might have been is not, however, profitable thinking. Still, it does seem to me tragic that we have just one little chance, we poor women, and that that we fling away."

"Chance of what?" asked Miss Longstaffe, stiffly; she was studying the workings of Margaret's mind with some curiosity. "Do you allude to marriage? Or do you mean a chance to live sensibly and honestly and profitably? Every hour we have a fresh chance for that."

"I meant a chance of happiness," said Margaret, "and it is only to very young and inexperienced women that happiness and marriage are convertible terms. Marriage is a subject I ponder little on now. When I remember what I have already done in that line, it is looking my greatest folly in the face; and I do not enjoy the sight of it. But when you talk of a fresh opportunity to live well coming every hour, I can't help seeing the fallacy of it. Your having lived badly yesterday, trammels you today." Margaret pressed her hands to her temples as if they ached.

"I never told you about my visit from Miss Fothergill, a few weeks ago," she said, in a low voice.

"No; what did she have to say?"

"She urged me to get a divorce from Robert."

"Pray, what business is that of hers?"

"She seemed to have some direct inspiration concerning my affairs, and spoke with the most earnest convictions. She declared I could not be a true woman—live honestly, write worthily, or bring up Gladys as I should—unless I had something real and tangible to go upon. In short, I could not at once be married and free."

"What did you answer?"

"Nothing very wise!"

"What did you think?"

"You know how I feel. Robert has not been a very helpful husband. He took all my money and muddled it away, then left me to take care of myself; nevertheless I doubt if I could bring myself to the point of going back upon my promises to him. I feel rather like hiding his weaknesses, absurdities, and failures. But I will confess to you, Sarah, that there are times when I feel angry and impatient with him. Don't you see that I really could be a better woman if Robert were not my husband. It is hard to earn money by writing as I do; if I could command high prices, like the masters of the craft, I would work night and day willingly. But I have no genius, and sometimes I am so tired, so dismally tired, of going on trying. I seem to have written myself out, and a voice whispers to me out of the darkness and asks

what is to become of Gladys and me in the future, when I have no more silly stories to tell. Oh, I should love to be taken care of, surrounded, guarded, kept from all anxieties and necessity for makeshifts. One day when we were at Mr. Bell's I suddenly thought to myself that if I were free, Mr. Bell would be glad to make me his wife. For a moment the idea of freeing myself from Robert took on the shape of an urgent duty; but presently the fancy passed. Of course, it would be better for Gladys and better for me to live there with Mr. Bell, if such a thing had been possible. But we can only have what is our own in life; and Robert, with his follies and his mistakes and his worse than mistakes, is what belongs to me. Some time or other I shall have him back; he will need my help and sympathy again. How dreadful it would be to do evil to him, no matter what ease and comfort came to myself."

"That is right," said Miss Longstaffe, almost startled to hear Margaret echo her own words on the same subject. She remembered very well how Mr. Bell's face looked that day when she cut short his hopes. She knew too very well that he had never forgiven her. There are offences which no man forgives, and she had committed the unpardonable sin. It passed through her mind that it was perhaps her duty to enlighten Margaret concerning his wishes. But her tongue did not easily let go its grip upon a subject it had once held fast; so she said nothing. It was long past the hour when she usually went to her studio, but the dissipations of the day before had

made her indolent. After living out of the current so long, she had enjoyed the rush of the world's movement. She had been very proud of Margaret at the musicale the day before. She had sat in a corner silent, but observant, and not a trait in one of the women in the room had escaped her. They were people she had heard about, and concerning many of whom her imagination had already been stirred. She had scrutinized them as only an artist can, listened to their voices and studied the meaning of every word they had said. "But, Lord! what poor stuff it was that they did talk," as Pepys said when he listened to the conversation of some very great people centuries ago. There had been something in the serious way in which these leaders of society discharged the small duty of listening to a new singer, who asked for their support, which had puzzled Miss Longstaffe. They seemed to enjoy the task of patronizing, and made the most earnest efforts to be generous towards Mlle. Donati, who was, to Miss Longstaffe's mind, a little humbug. Miss Longstaffe was in fact jealous of the effusive tone everybody took towards the singer. Why could they not use it to Margaret instead? It was quite evident that her beauty and her grand air had made an impression upon them all, like a bird of shining, snowy plumage in a dim place, with no room to stretch its wings. Mlle. Donati wanted nothing of them except their patronage, and they were in no such haste to throne Margaret where she ought to be as they were to throne the singer. They had ex-

changed little remarks concerning Margaret, which Miss Longstaffe had heard half pained and half elated. How were these rich strangers to know how to judge Margaret, when they knew nothing of the bravery with which she had accepted cruel circumstances. It was not perhaps easy to believe she had been compelled to bend her neck to the yoke, while she held up her pretty head in that proud way. Miss Longstaffe was bitterly jealous and eagerly ambitious for Margaret, and longed to prove to these grandees that Margaret could not only take her place among them, but vie with them, and surpass them. For the first time she begrudged Robert Kent his hold upon his wife, and confessed to herself that Mr. Bell had spoken with wisdom and as a child of this world should. It was Miss Longstaffe's first admittance to the fairy realm of what is called society, and it had had its usual eerie effect of putting objects in fresh lights, and rousing ambitions hitherto unknown.

"You really enjoyed the afternoon, did you not, Sarah?" said Margaret, looking at her friend with a little surprise, as she dwelt on certain trivial aspects of the gathering, to which she seemed to give undue value.

"You have been in society, and you know these things," said Miss Longstaffe. "I have not been in society, and I know nothing of these things. It is a matter of surprise to me that these people can meet in just the pretty way they do — saying just enough, never too much; insisting on nothing, yet making

their least word carry its full weight; no undue emphasis, but a delightful faculty of investing the least bagatelle with interest."

Margaret laughed. "Oh, that is your artistic way of looking at things and enriching them with what is in your own mind, just as in Europe you would grow frantic over the tones of some slimy old wall, which everybody else wanted to avoid. I should like to ask you if Mrs. Charlton does not give undue emphasis to every other word. '*So charming!*' '*So delightfully fresh!*' '*I was there.*' '*I took pains to have him invited.*' And you admire the way people listen to each other, and sweetly and sympathetically believe in each other. Each one of those soft-voiced, sweet-faced ladies knows that she herself is a humbug, but that if she wants to be believed in she must help inflate somebody else's balloon. When I hear them going on in the way you admire, I feel like giving a pin-prick to each windbag, that I may watch them collapse into nothing."

"Well, for you this is fine cynicism!"

"Lilly Townsend just suits these people. I confess it does half seem to me that social popularity is nothing to be proud of."

Miss Longstaffe mused a little. She hardly liked to have Margaret take this tone concerning these grand people, who had lent them a brief *éclat* yesterday. She decided to avoid the subject, and suggested another by saying, "Do you suppose Mrs. Townsend had really lost her vinaigrette, or that she came back for some other purpose, and, finding Dr. Walton here, preferred not to come in."

"I don't know, I am sure," said Margaret, languidly. "Now I think of it, your supposition is a likely one. It is eminently characteristic of Lilly to tell a fib if she can. By the way, did you observe Mrs. Devereux?"

"Yes; what a quiet woman she is! She seems cut in alabaster."

"I wish I had insisted that her daughter should have a card," Margaret exclaimed, with peculiar energy. "In all the world there is no one I seem to have quite as much curiosity about as Miss Devereux."

For foolish, inconsistent Margaret was thinking; we may be sure, she was thinking of Alexander Walton, and wondering what his memory was of her to-day; if he had compared her with Miss Devereux, and found her wanting in those delicate gifts which endeared his fiancée to him; if he would remember her (Margaret) to-day, a week hence; if he were likely ever to come and see her again. She was in no wise disposed to underrate a woman like Elinor Devereux. She said to herself only a girl like that could fulfil Alex Walton's ideal; remote, guarded, inaccessible to vulgar approach, not a trace of her first bloom and aroma lost. Margaret realized that, in contrast, she herself was the actual, the prosaic; born a butterfly perhaps, but trailed through the mire of the world, and controlled by the ignoble necessities of everyday human life.

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTERNOON TEA.

MARGARET was shortly to gain her coveted opportunity to meet Miss Devereux. All her guests at the musicale left cards within a day or two, and not a few made an actual visit. Among the latter were Mrs. Charlton and her daughter, and two hours after their call an invitation came for Mrs. Kent and Miss Longstaffe to a luncheon on the following Monday.

"See what your mother has sent us," said Margaret, in high spirits, to Charlton, when he came in next day, at four o'clock. "A real bona fide invitation to a lunch party."

"Are you going?" asked Charlton, sitting down by the fire.

The first snow of the season was falling outside, in the great flakes which make the children say that "Jerseymen are picking their geese." Gladys was at the window watching them in an ecstasy of delight. Miss Longstaffe sat near her, knitting red wool on great wooden needles, and standing on the hearth-rug were Tom Updegraff and Colonel Weir, the latter a regular habitué of Mrs. Kent's rooms — a short, elderly man, who said and did little himself, but

who, with this exception, visited only at the most exclusive houses, and was supposed to understand social matters better than any man in New York.

"Of course I am going," said Margaret, bringing Charlton a cup of tea with her own hands, and dropping him a little courtesy. She wore a shabby black silk walking-dress, but had given a dainty touch to her toilette by assuming a gauzy apron, made high and long like a child's, set off by blue bows. "Haven't I been knocking patiently at the door of society ever since I came to New York?" she went on; "and do you suppose that, after waiting outside in the cold all this time, I can afford to turn away when it condescendingly opens wide?"

"If you call that sort of thing society — all women —"

"It is very evident that you are sore over your exclusion. Naturally, I would rather go to a ladies' luncheon than to the most magnificent dinner-party."

"Quite right, Mrs. Kent," said Colonel Weir. "Your own sex are the lawgivers; we are entirely under their thumbs. A ladies' luncheon is a sacred assemblage, where all sorts of delicate affairs are promulgated."

"I've always understood," put in Tom Updegraff, "that there were some peculiar rites of admission to that sort of entertainment. I trust you have good nerves, Mrs. Kent. I don't know precisely what happens when women get together, but it's something to be spoken of with 'bated breath. I

fancy a kind of graven image is set up, to which are offered prayers, litanies, and hymns. I suppose it's in the shape of a man."

"Quite the contrary," declared Charlton; "it's a female lay figure, with one of Worth's dresses on."

"Then afterwards," pursued Tom Updegraff, "there is an ordeal by fire — for the novices, you know. If you pass through that unscathed, you are admitted to the inside mysteries; otherwise, you are dropped, — so to speak, cut."

"Is that all?" said Margaret. "I do not tremble in the least at that sort of test."

"I do," remarked Miss Longstaffe. "I shall never survive it."

"Oh, do not tremble, Sarah," exclaimed Margaret. "They are likely to make you a priestess at once; for you accept not only the ceremonies, but the beliefs. I discover great social talents in Miss Longstaffe," she continued, turning to her own immediate circle. "Since the day of the musicale she has fairly teemed with anecdotal reminiscence. She seems to be wholly taken by surprise that those magnificent people — that is, your mammas, sisters, and cousins, mes-sieurs — are really human beings. She confides to me admiringly that they called each other by their first names, and that one praised another's new pelisse. I am afraid Miss Longstaffe is on the verge of becoming a second Lilly Townsend."

"I wish she had kept to her belief that they were monsters and dragons," said Tom Updegraff.

“ ‘Seen too oft, familiar with their face,
She’ll first endure, then pity, then embrace,’

and she’ll be corrupting you, and making you a fashionable woman.”

“Mrs. Kent could not be a fashionable woman if she tried ever so hard,” cried Charlton, indignantly.

“Mrs. Kent could be anything,” put in Colonel Weir.

“Why could I not be a fashionable woman?” demanded Margaret, rather jealous of Charlton’s phrase. “It seems to me a particularly easy achievement, made up of negatives.”

“You define it precisely. Now, you are negative in nothing. You bristle with positive ideas, beliefs, and expressions.”

“Mrs. Kent could lead society,” observed Tom Updegraeff, critically. “Following the lead of mediocre people could never be her wish or instinct.”

“A leader needs wit, impudence, knowledge of the world,” said Margaret. “Now, well equipped as I am in one respect, I can’t flatter myself about the other two.”

“Don’t be a leader of society, don’t be a fashionable woman,” said Charlton, with disgust. “Their wit and knowledge of the world are not a talent, but a vice—something you may well pique yourself on abstaining from. As to this lunch-party, it is not a bad notion for you to go to that. My mother would like to get out of the groove if she could, and she fills up the yawning vacuum with the best she can find. You may enjoy the occasion, although I should

suppose, except for the gratification of your curiosity, it would be something to run away from."

"How many will be there?"

"Twenty or more, I dare say."

"What shall I wear?" asked Margaret, with eagerness. "Honestly, I am not quite certain what the correct thing is."

"Wear the dress you are wearing now," said Tom Updegraeff. "I never saw you look so well in my life."

"Thanks. That shows the worth of your advice. This old, patched gown is my pet economy. Whenever I have been extravagant, I solace my wounded conscience by putting it on, and at once feel soothed, almost commended, by the still small voice."

"What has the still small voice been worrying you about to-day?"

"A new bonnet I bought this morning. You see, I went to Monnet's just to look. It occurred to me I should need a bonnet for the luncheon, and I wanted to find out if anything they had in could give me an idea towards furbishing up one of my old ones. But, alas! I saw this divine *confection*, this triumph of art, just as it was taken out of its box. 'Let me try that on,' I exclaimed, urged by my familiar demon. Of course I was lost. After once putting on that bonnet, not to have had it for my own would have been not to have lived. And to have gone to that luncheon without it—perhaps to have seen it there surmounting the head of some other woman—would have been a crushing experience. I ought to have

said, 'Vade retro;' I ought never to have gone to that absurdly expensive Monnet's at all. But I went, I saw, I squandered, oh, such a frightful sum!"

"I trust Miss Longstaffe scolded you well," said Charlton.

"Not half as much as she ought to have scolded me. I took pains to propitiate her by the sight of the bonnet on my head before I confessed my sin. Superior being although she is, ever since the day of the musicale she has been stirred by some feminine passions. The bonnet conquered her almost as abjectly as it did me."

"All this sounds pretty bad," said Tom Updegraff. "You can't get the better of my judgment, Mrs. Kent, by simply narrating all this. I think buying that bonnet was a shocking, a reprehensible, a positively sinful piece of extravagance, — I do."

"Tom wants to see that bonnet on in order to pacify his indignation," suggested Colonel Weir. "As for me, I withhold my opinion until I am able to decide on the true merits of the case."

"I should like to see that bonnet," said Charlton.

"I want to keep it as a surprise till the day of the luncheon."

"We really couldn't bear this conflict of mind concerning the moral aspects of your action until that time," said Colonel Weir. "Besides, we shall not be there."

"Please put it on," said Charlton.

"I implore you," said Tom Updegraff.

Thus adjured, Margaret yielded, and first de-

spatched Gladys for the bandbox, then countermanded the order, ran after her, and vanished behind the curtains which veiled the entrance to the third room. She was gone precisely five minutes, which weighed heavily upon the spirits of the party. Miss Longstaffe dropped her stitches in nervousness at having to bear alone the responsibility of three male visitors. Colonel Weir wound his watch, and listened to its ticking as if it had been a stethoscope to detect some vital disorder; Tom Updegraff compared the depth of the springs of all the empty chairs one after the other, while Charlton sat gazing into the fire. Then Margaret re-emerged, having taken off her apron and assumed a velvet jacket and the bonnet, out of whose dark rich tones her face blossomed like a flower.

"Behold the miracle!" said she, and stood on the rug, laughing, while the three men walked round and round her as if she had been a statue.

"Isn't it soft, rich, plummy?" she asked.

"Yes; quite correct; really neat," said Colonel Weir.

"Neat! Good gracious! Sarah, hear Colonel Weir! He calls this bonnet *neat*!"

"Surely, you would not like a bonnet that was not neat!"

Tom Updegraff's and Charlton's silence was more expressive. Tom, in fact, presently began to show signs of being overcome, and went down on his knees in an attitude of adoration. Charlton was more serious and more in earnest. Indeed the trouble with

Charlton was that he was beginning to be rather desperately in earnest, and Mrs. Kent's vivid and exquisite beauty, her imperturbable uplifted look, like a happy, unconscious child's, which showed her wholly untouched by the passion she inspired, swayed him more and more each time he saw her.

"Well, Mrs. Kent," said Colonel Weir, "no doubt the purchase was an extravagance. It was, I fear, a somewhat unprincipled extravagance, when we consider where stocks are at the present moment, and that there are rumors of a fresh war in Europe. Abstractly speaking, you really ought to have made an old bonnet do, and given the money to the poor. You ought to have considered how many loaves of bread it would have provided for hungry men. Still, looking at the bonnet in the concrete, —"

"Or rather at you concrete in the bonnet," put in Tom.

"We cannot help exonerating you from the heaviest part of the blame. The real fault lies with the milliner."

"Nothing of the sort; she deserves a medal. And we praise, we extol you, Mrs. Kent, for having bought the bonnet. We thought we had been bewitched by bonnets before. Have we not lived? — have we not known cities? — have we not met beautiful women, and their manners noted? — even the accident of their headgear, have we not been moved by? — but now we bow down and confess that, until this happy moment, we have never yet seen a bonnet. Away with sordid, parsimonious and meagre economies, when such a bon-

net is concerned," pursued Tom Updegraeff. "Never was a hundred dollars better spent!"

"A hundred dollars," repeated Margaret. "Do you mean to say you think the price of this bonnet was a hundred dollars!"

"Well, two hundred, then. Whatever it cost, it was cheap, absurdly cheap — an absolutely heavenly bargain for the price."

"I paid twenty-seven dollars for it."

"Twenty-seven dollars?"

"Twenty-seven dollars?"

"Twenty-seven dollars?"

"Yes, twenty-seven dollars, and it was quite enough. Indeed it was too much. I could have bought the materials for a third of the cost, — but that miraculous *touch* I never could have given it."

"And you, my poor child," said Colonel Weir, "have to endure qualms of conscience for paying twenty-seven dollars for a bonnet? The sky ought to rain bonnets upon you."

"'Tis worth fifty dollars simply to have looked at you in the bonnet," said Tom Updegraeff. "I'm ready to pay as much cash down."

"I'll double it," said Charlton, eagerly.

"I'll give you the exhibition for nothing," said Margaret, with a little shrug. She had to tell herself that she had no right to be proud or to feel annoyed at the air of alacrity with which both these young fellows took up the question of money — indeed, almost drew it out of their pockets. Had she not talked freely — too freely — of money to them, over

and over? Had she not made her needs a common stock of interest and debate? Again and again had not some miraculous gift arrived, apparently from the unseen powers, just in time to stave off disaster? Did not Miss Longstaffe's pictures adorn the rooms of both Updegraeff and Charlton? No, she had no right to be proud; for she could not forget these benefits, and she would have been most ungrateful if she could. Still, she hated this proffer of money to-day, and was ready to resent it although it had been a joke. Alas! that she could not both eat her cake and have it. She could not be candid and open with absolute abandon, and at the same time inviolate in the thoughts of those men who watched and listened to her.

Colonel Weir saw the color deepen in her cheek, and the moisture come to her eyes.

"Oh, you rich, materialistic, unchivalrous young fellows!" said he. "In my day, we did not talk about money before divinities."

Margaret tore off her bonnet and jacket, and came back buttoning on her apron.

"None of you have ever seen my beautiful work," said she. "I am doing a table-cover for a Christmas present."

The early dusk had closed in by this time, and she went about drawing the curtains and lighting the lamps, bringing Gladys to the fire to warm her hands. The child knelt down on the rug and held up her fingers to the blaze. She looked white; her eyes were dreamy, and she fastened their far-off gaze upon the flame of the sea-coal.

"How did you get so cold?" asked Charlton, kneeling down beside her, and beginning to chafe the little waxen members.

"I put out my hand and caught the flakes as they came," said Gladys. "They are not like feathers at all. They are like stars, and some like circles and others like crowns. They light on your hand quite perfect so you can see how beautiful they are—then, all at once, where are they? *They are gone.*"

"She speaketh a parable," said Tom Updegraff.

" 'An old man slowly said —
Where's the snow? ' "

quoted Miss Longstaffe.

" '*Où sont les neiges d'antan?* ' is not a proper question for a child to ask—it belongs to an old fellow like me," said Colonel Weir. "I put it ruefully every day of my life,— 'Where are all my old friends?' 'Where are the pretty women I used to think were in love with me?' 'Where's my slender waist?' 'Where is that nice little balance I had at my banker's?' "

"Gladys," said Margaret, "you must tell Mr. Bell about the snowflakes, and he will put it into a little poem; and then, instead of their having vanished into nothingness, they will live forever."

"I will," said Gladys delightedly. "Mr. Bell will know where the snowflakes go."

Margaret had sat down by the table, and in the light of the shaded lamp was embroidering—her fair, taper fingers glancing to and fro holding silks and flosses.

"Is this the table-cover?" asked Charlton. "I am quite certain that you are doing it for Mr. Bell."

"Yes, it is for Mr. Bell. See, it is a vine of passion-flowers."

"You never worked a table-cover for me, not even a pincushion nor a pair of slippers, Mrs. Kent," said Tom Updegraeff, in a tone of injury. "I suppose it's because I'm too young and handsome and interesting for such tender demonstrations to be proper and safe."

"Age has its prerogatives," said Colonel Weir.

"I say," Tom went on, his brown eyes dancing with mischief, "is that the kind of work Penelope put off her suitors with?"

Charlton made an exclamation, and even Colonel Weir was aghast; Margaret did not flinch, but looked Updegraeff full in the face.

"You are comparing me to Penelope," she said. "I am not sure that it is a good joke, but perhaps you will go and tell it at the clubs, and raise a laugh at my expense. For my Odysseus is away, and he stays a long time, and it may be he is detained by the syrens. And although in these days women under such circumstances do not have suitors, I do give a cup of tea to gentlemen who come to see me in the afternoon."

"Oh, Mrs. Kent, don't punish me any more," cried Updegraeff, his face on fire.

"This is not the kind of work Penelope made famous," Margaret went on, her voice still clear and her manner deliberate. "That was tapestry. And I do not pick this out at night, for I am honestly very much in a hurry to get it finished. I want to give it to dear Mr. Bell on Christmas day."

The whole circle was a little awed,—even Gladys, who did not understand, but looked at her mother with a quivering lip and the tears starting to her eyes. It was one of those moments when Margaret felt as if the whole world was against her—as if she could trust nothing and no one. Any familiar thing became a missile, and she longed to hide her face from the swift-hurrying darts. She sat nevertheless with an air of noble quietude, drawing her needle swiftly through and through the satin, all the others looking at her as if under a solemn spell to watch her white eyelids and the proud purpose of her beautiful lips. The pause seemed endless, until Miss Longstaffe said, “Do any of you know Mr. Bell’s nephew, Dr. Walton?”

“Oh, yes,” answered Colonel Weir. “A fine fellow. I remember him as a boy, when he gave signs of genius. I dare say he has some of it left in him, but one believes more in genius nowadays before it settles to work. I ain’t scientific myself.”

“He’s a capital fellow,” said Updegraeff. “I don’t pretend to understand his theories, but his facts are delightful. No better company to be found than Alex Walton.”

“Engaged to Miss Devereux, isn’t he?” inquired Charlton.

“So they say, but it is certainly not announced. She does not seem to me just the one for him, but I dare say he sees more in her than I do.” It was Updegraeff who was speaking. “He always wants something actual; nothing comes amiss to him so

long as it is a real experience. Now, that girl never struck me as living more than an inch deep. Everything in her mind seems thin — rather sterile. She gets her clothes from Paris, her religion from the Rubric, and her ideas from the fashionable authorities."

"I never discovered that she had any ideas at all," said Charlton.

"She is a high-bred girl — no follies, no mistakes, never run away with by her feelings," said Colonel Weir.

"Walton may like that. I won't say I want my wife to be run away with by her feelings, but I want to be sure she has got feelings."

Margaret's thoughts had by this time quite wandered away from her momentary grievance, and she was looking from one to another of the speakers, following their words eagerly.

"Did you ever see Miss Devereux, Mrs. Kent?" asked Charlton, who had pondered more than a little of late how much Dr. Walton's evident interest in Margaret, and hers in him, had meant on that dreary evening at the theatre.

"I had a mere glimpse of her once, but gained a very clear impression, and ever since I have longed to meet her."

"You are tolerably certain to do so at the lunch-party, for my sister and she are intimate."

The color had come back to Margaret's cheeks and lips, and the light to her eyes. It could be but a momentary mood with her to feel that she could no

longer struggle, no longer suffer, that she wished to die. Then her courage and serenity re-asserted themselves. It was six o'clock; and Colonel Weir took his leave, and the young men followed him. Margaret merely looked up, bowed and nodded as they made their adieux, and before the door had closed upon them she took Gladys in her arms and held her close to her breast.

"Mamma," said Gladys, solemnly, "please tell me something."

"Anything you ask, my little one."

"Who was Penelope?"

"She was a woman, Gladys, whose husband went sailing over the seas in the black-hulled ships, to fight battles on the windy plains of Troy, and he stayed long, long years away."

"Fighting battles all the while?"

"For ten years he fought, and then he turned to come home; but oh, it was so hard for him to get back. He wanted to see his wife, but how was a man to reach her when everything on the wide earth stretched out arms to detain him?"

"Did he come at last?"

"Oh, yes, he came; after twenty years he came."

"Twenty years is a long time," said Gladys, doubtfully. "One might go round and round the world in twenty years, I should think."

"But then in those days there were no steamers. And the deep-hulled ships had a knack of getting into trouble."

"There are steamers to South America, are there

not, mamma?" Margaret looked at the child's face, startled at the suggestion.

"Yes, dear."

"Why does not papa come back then?" asked Gladys, with a little quaver in her voice, which gave it a tone of indignation."

"That I cannot tell, my dear. He has business, perhaps, and then he is not very rich, and it costs money to come back."

"Should you like him to come back, mamma?"

"Not unless he wishes to come, Gladys."

"But if, perhaps, he wanted to come, but was afraid we did not want him to come?"

She paused, and mother and child looked into each other's face, both pale. "Go on, Gladys," said Margaret.

"I should like to write to him, and say, 'Papa, if you will come, we shall be so glad to see you.'"

Margaret laughed.

"Should you feel badly if I wrote, mamma?"

"No, dear."

There was a creak at the door, and they both turned. There stood Tom Updegraeff bowing very low, hat in hand, and an honest, appealing look in his eyes.

"May I come in one moment?" he asked.

"Have you left anything?" Margaret asked coolly.

"Unless you will forgive me, I shall have left my peace of mind behind me forever. Still, do not forgive me too easily. I do not deserve that."

"You gave me an uncomfortable moment," said Margaret. "Still, it is better for me not to be comfortable, but to be made to remember things always. There are light-hearted hours when I half forget, and I —"

"Oh, Mrs. Kent," muttered Tom, "you don't know me. And when you alluded to the club, it cut me like a knife."

"Let us forget it all."

"You can't forgive it, but you are ready to forget it."

"Precisely."

"As I said before," said Tom, "you don't know me. I want to be true—I want to be kind, Heaven knows—if—if things were different—I—I—I should try to show you there were no limits to my good intentions. I often envy Charlton his knack of showing a romantic sort of knight-errantry, which I can only feel."

"Oh, thank you, thank you," said Margaret. "I really do believe you are kind-hearted and as true as most people. And don't turn knight-errant on my account, I beg. Gladys dear, bid Mr. Updegraeff good night. He is a good friend—a good, generous friend to me. You can't be too grateful to him."

She turned away, and Tom Updegraeff got out of the room as best he could. Miss Longstaffe, who had hidden herself behind the portière when the young fellow came in, was about to re-emerge, believing that the coast was clear, when all at once she was obliged to hide herself anew, for a second knock came at the door, and Gladys admitted Charlton.

"What have you come back for?" demanded Margaret. "Here has Mr. Updegraeff just put in a second appearance."

"I know," faltered Charlton, on whose shoulders half an inch of snow was melting. "I saw what Updegraeff was thinking of, for he dodged me at the corner, saying that he had an errand down at Sidney Place. I knew he was only going round the block to avoid me, then was coming here. So I waited."

Margaret laughed. "It reminds me of a farce," said she.

"I don't feel farcical," said Charlton; "quite the contrary."

"Well, it reminds me of a serio-comic tragedy then."

"Oh, you take things in such a light way, or you seem to. I don't know whether I would rather believe in your levity or your depth of feeling. Either belief makes me suffer."

"Suffer?" echoed Margaret. "I see no necessity for your suffering." He looked at her with a white face and she threw up her hands with an impatient gesture. For a moment she was in doubt what to say or do, but she went straight on through her embarrassment and annoyance. "If you really intend to stay and dine with us, do take off your overcoat; for you are dripping water in little pools all over my nice rug."

"I suppose I am making a fool of myself."

"Oh, dear me, no! I'm not critical. I have so few good friends like you, I can't afford to do other-

wise than to take them as they are, inconsistent, paradoxical, blowing hot and cold in a breath, — now giving me manna from Heaven, and now a stone to grind my teeth against. I am thankful for what I can get.”

Charlton stamped his foot as she looked at him not coldly, not harshly, not defiantly, but with more spirit than he had hitherto seen in her. Ten minutes before, it had seemed to him a fine action to rush back and throw himself at her feet; there had been something transcendent in the idea of it. At present this impulse seemed not only misleading, but more than a little indefinite and vague.

“Good night,” said he, turning on his heel at once, and striding down stairs.

“What was the matter with Mr. Charlton, mamma?” asked Gladys, considerably puzzled. “Had he done something to make you sorry?”

“I think he wanted dreadfully to stay and dine with us,” said Margaret; “but with only half a chicken, how could we have a party?”

CHAPTER IX.

A LADIES' LUNCH-PARTY.

UPDEGRAEFF made his peace-offering to Gladys instead of to her mamma. It was a basket of roses and violets.

"So large I could lie down on it," said Gladys. "See, I could lie down on it perfectly well."

"The most foolish waste of money," said Margaret. She was in a mood to eschew the vanities of life, which brought her so many disappointments, and look for its real satisfactions—and among these she did not include bouquets. It might have been difficult for her to give a clear definition of what would realize her idea of a satisfactory life.

Hitherto she had turned away from one set of ideas after another with an intense conviction that what she desired was not in them. But this sense of failure had, up to the present time, been no check upon her belief that what she needed had existence somewhere. It merely gave her an impetus for a fresh search. She now said that she would no longer waste her time and pains on young men like Updegraff and Charlton, who had neither the sense nor the good taste to refrain from spoiling her peace of mind. She had been for some time perfectly well aware that

they considered themselves in love with her, but had supposed that simmering condition of heart and intellect belonged to their age, and carried little significance along with it. It was good for them to be in such safe hands, and it did her no harm. But after the little episode in the last chapter she did not at once regain her self-confidence, and experienced, together with self-reproach, anger and disgust towards them. For of late she had suffered some struggles of mind, and the moment she was conscious of her own errors she gave an inward sob of mortification. She longed to be sweet, clean, whole all through, without counterfeited or artifice. Once it had seemed to her that the part of a woman of the world was much like that of a clever juggler who made things appear as they were not. So long as certain desirable effects could be brought out, what matter if somewhere under the fair superstructure might be found some artifice and sham? Her faults in the past — which had come from mere erroneous thinking, caused by ignorance, impulsiveness, and youthful conceit — had not been heavy faults. Still, she did not attempt to justify them to herself, only prayed that she might build a better life on these mistakes and foolish beginnings. "Thank God, there has been nothing worse than mistakes," she said over and over again. She had had youthful energies to spend, and she had spent them, in capricious, scattered fancies, it is true, but not so recklessly that she had anything to hide or even to blush for.

But Updegraff's allusion to Penelope and her ab-

sent lord and present suitors, and Charlton's incoherent behavior, had brought back the old discord which twanged through all the music of her life, unresolved and unbearable. What peace remained for her if she were forced to dread these chance allusions? Why could not Robert come back, she began to ask herself, with a new sort of irritation against him for leaving her exposed to absurd misconstructions and possibly damaging remarks. Her consciousness once roused, her imagination could easily enough suggest the things people were no doubt saying of her every hour. She longed to feel free to select her own objects in life, and determine her own fate. This she might in a measure do if Robert were with her—or if she were legally separated from him. The latter alternative she hated. If it were her real fate to go on being his wife, she was ready to spend herself and to be spent in his service. But to have to endure these galling restraints and petty restrictions day by day and hour by hour, when he was actually nothing to her and cared nothing for her, was too hopeless and illogical a destiny for her to accept with patience. Still, brought face to face with the only means by which this Gordian knot of difficulty was to be solved, she shrank back, terrified and shocked at the word *divorce*. She preferred that Robert should return and show the world that she was not unprotected. Margaret wanted, it may be seen, what was easiest and most comfortable for herself. Duty as an object in itself, and a lifelong service to it—a service of strength combined with inexhaustible pa-

tience, of arduous resolution followed at the cost of happiness and self-enjoyment—she knew little or nothing about. She had read Wordsworth's Ode to Duty with a genuine uplifting of soul; but in order to attain any real convictions as to the meaning of personal duty, she was compelled, like the rest of us, to begin at the beginning, and discover and realize it as a truth for herself.

Interspersed with reflections upon her individual lot, she had many thoughts about the lunch-party for the next few days, seeing in it an opportunity to make friends among her own sex. She put a good deal of seriousness into her little preparations, deciding to avoid the least ostentation or anything which might provoke criticism, either in her toilette or behavior. Miss Longstaffe, on the other hand, she fitted out with a certain splendor of appointments, which made her natural ugliness something formidable, grandiose, almost approaching beauty from its mere perfection.

Mrs. Charlton had at first yielded to her son when she invited Mrs. Kent and her artist friend to the luncheon; but once familiar with the idea, she liked it, and finally was quite carried away by it. But then Mrs. Charlton was often carried away by her ideas, and her friends had learned to accept them with a mental reservation. She had at one time fallen in love with simplicity. "Do let us be simple," she said, and went about picking up all the "simple" things she could find. She furnished her rooms in low tones of color, and pruned and pared, rejecting

this or that, until, growing into an abhorrence of color as vulgar and a longing for pure form, she finally made her house a marvel of bareness and hideousness. From this grub of medieval asceticism she emerged by swift transition into a state of Oriental gorgeousness, and essayed with success dazzling orgies of color, which she was always aiming to make coincide with the most supreme æstheticism. Still, to pine for something better than she had known was Mrs. Charlton's bent, and it had lately occurred to her mind that by introducing a few really clever people, familiar with ideas, she might lift the average of conversation which went on in her coterie. She had told several of her guests that Mrs. Kent and Miss Longstaffe were coming to the lunch, and gone so far as to hint that everybody was to get up a little superior conversation in consequence. Mrs. Townsend had made a telling remark when she had whispered to everybody at Mrs. Kent's musicale that "Mrs. Charlton was very good-natured." And it had been very freely circulated among the twenty ladies gathered when Mrs. Kent and Miss Longstaffe entered the parlor the day of the lunch. Yes, there could be no doubt concerning the hostess' supreme good nature in inviting a pretty woman like that, who had appropriated the affections of her son, and drawn him away from the society he ought to have adorned.

"Not only Roger Charlton, but Tom and George Updegraeff," somebody remarked *sotto voce*. "I am told they are there all the time."

Margaret and her companion as they entered were

regarded with a curiosity more or less hostile, and the smile of the former as her eyes traversed the room changed from hopefulness to timidity. Mrs. Charlton and her daughter spoke to them cordially; but the atmosphere was of the coldest, and Margaret wished herself away at once. The party included a few elderly ladies, one of whom was Mrs. Bellair, who gave Margaret a little bow and a high-pitched, "I am very glad to see you, Mrs. Kent, I'm sure." Ethel Sinclair came up with a little frosty greeting, and then Margaret was left to herself until they went out to lunch.

Four round tables were laid in the dining-room, and at each of these tables six ladies were to sit. Margaret wondered to herself who her companions were likely to be. She was glad to see that Mrs. Charlton was one, and was presently startled to discover that Miss Devereux was another. The remaining three were Ethel Sinclair, young Mrs. Sidney Updegraff, and a striking looking girl by the name of Grant. Margaret was introduced to the three with whom she was unacquainted, and was not slow in discovering that she was likely to be made extremely uncomfortable during the meal if she allowed herself to expect attention and consideration. Mrs. Charlton was at once taken possession of by Miss Grant, who sat between her and Margaret. Mrs. Updegraff, who was on Margaret's right, began a conversation with Miss Devereux, to which Miss Sinclair listened, and in which she joined whenever she had any opportunity.

"I am going to be sent to Coventry," said Margaret to herself. "Luckily, there is something to look at." Accordingly, she looked dreamily at the plants, at the profusion of cut flowers on the table, at the trails of smilax which wound about the plates and looped them to the group of glasses, at the fancifully devised menu and the odd-looking *hors-d'œuvres*. She lifted the bouquet of dark red roses which was laid for her, pressed it to her face and laid it down again. She was ready to cry, but she did not cry. After all, what had she to do with these people, and what did it really matter, she said to herself, whether they were kind to her or not. What did she care for in the world save to love and be loved by those closest to her? She was only too ready to yield her heart in return for kindness; but to hold her own against an array of women indifferent except when they were hostile, that was an effort beyond her. She ought not to have come. She needed her strength for other things. She had to use her wit to live by, as a substantial support, not as a guard against the chance encounters of rude, cold-hearted people. Wit? Had she any wit? What was she but a timid creature, with a knack of occasionally making something out of a lucky opportunity? These thoughts ran through her brain for the first quarter of an hour after they had sat down, but such an irksome state of mind could not continue. She had borne depressing experiences before by saying to herself that it was all just so much material cheaply gained for her books and stories. A landscape full of generous color

hung opposite on the wall, and its glow warmed the chill at her heart. After all, why should she not rejoice to be here in this rich, beautiful house? And what difference did it make about the mere accident of her being surrounded by people who did not regard her as belonging to their world? She did not belong to it; she could lay no claim to any more than an outside place; and why should they yield her an innermost one? She had her own life and aims, as diametrically opposed to theirs as theirs to hers. They had the temporal kingdom, while she at least professed to live in the intellectual and spiritual. She would not covet their fleshpots any more than they did her paper, pens and ink. It was thus that Margaret was first shy and hurt, then humble, and at last proud. But these processes of mind did not imprint themselves upon her face, nor did they draw the attention of her neighbors, who continued to talk on, repeating names she had never heard, describing events of which she was ignorant, and discussing matters as remote from her imagination as the politics of the planet Jupiter. Miss Grant was entertaining Mrs. Charlton with an account of the internal workings of a Woman's Bureau, of which she was a manager, while the others were comparing social notes, counting up their engagements in order to insure a spare day for some enterprise they were all engaged in. The conversation did not flag an instant on either hand; and had not Margaret made up her mind to believe that her being left out in the cold was an accidental circumstance, she must have sus-

pected that considerable resolution and energy lay behind that incessant prattle. It was not interesting, and it seemed too strenuously kept up by Miss Grant and Mrs. Updegraeff to suggest its being a mere pastime to either. Mrs. Charlton was hardly allowed to finish a sentence. Her attention was every moment freshly challenged; after a time she began to show signs of fatigue, but Miss Grant's eloquence, unfaltering, copious, as exhaustive as exhausting, swept on remorselessly.

Margaret had asked for an opportunity to measure Miss Devereux' beauty and her powers; and this she certainly enjoyed, for Miss Devereux sat directly opposite her. To begin with, her toilette was a marvel to Margaret, defying analysis or criticism; it showed a shimmer of cool tints, like the burnished plumage of a dove, but of what combination, of what textures it was composed, Margaret could no more have told than if Miss Devereux had been altogether a being from a different sphere. She could at least decide, however, that the young lady's intrinsic beauty was not so generous an endowment as she had at first sight believed; what beauty there was seemed marred by too much imperiousness, and a suggestion that her domination was not likely to be invariably the effect of sheer charm. Her voice was sharp, and often a little querulous. Mrs. Updegraeff deferred to her in every way. In fact, Miss Devereux invariably, without fuss or parade, took the leading place everywhere. Whatever the universe contained for her she knew consummately well; and whatever knowledge

existed outside her own needs and her own equipments possessed not the least importance for her. She settled every question which came up by a word. Anything she approved of was good—anything she rejected was not only bad, it was insignificant. That other minds existed, with other standards and beliefs, she apparently had no idea. She could utter a galling and discouraging fact in a way that invested her opinions with a sort of critical value, even to a bright woman like Mrs. Updegraff; and she was rarely differed with. Margaret listened, her mind left hazy, confused, inert, by the subjects, which aroused neither interest nor speculation. Many of the observations surprised her, but if she had been appealed to she would have had scant wish to vent any private and individual feelings or views. She would have felt sadly hampered if forced to speak; for she must either have stunted and altered her judgments to suit her listeners, or have felt that she was discoursing without tact or taste. For it really seemed to her that these elegant women reduced to the slenderest proportions all the main facts of life, its deep problems of sadness and pain, its crying necessities, loves, joys and hatreds, in order that they might fit into a delicate scheme in which they had no proper place.

All at once, however, Margaret, sitting, while the courses were being changed, with her hands crossed in her lap, suddenly pinched herself to discover whether she was awake or dreaming; for the sensation of thinning away into insignificance had something of a nightmare effect.

"If I be I, as I do hope I be," she said to herself, "I will make a remark presently."

She waited her chance patiently, looking with a bright, expectant smile into the face of her hostess, who presently smiled back at her encouragingly.

"Mlle. Donati is having a great success, Mrs. Charlton," said Margaret on the instant, utterly ignoring the topics under discussion. "She sent me word that the impresario was at her feet. He came to see her, and found her trying on a white satin and lace gown she had just unpacked, the bill of which frightened her out of her senses. She had lighted all the gas burners in the room, in order to get the effect. She was about to turn them out, and slip into a peignoir, and receive him humbly, when an idea struck her; and instead she drew on a pair of gloves, flung herself on a sofa, and sent word that he might come in. The manager looked about him quite dazzled. The little parlor was full of bouquets; there was a blaze of gas; the Donati's toilette was magnificent. 'I can give you just five minutes,' she said, with the air of a queen. He stayed ten minutes, then she dismissed him; but meantime he had written her a check for all he owed her, and had put her down for *Traviata* on Friday night."

Everyone save Mrs. Charlton had been talking when Margaret began, but when she finished all the ladies were listening to her. Mrs. Sidney Updegraff, who delighted in characteristic things, was diverted.

"The impresario evidently considered that a woman who wore white satin gowns, and burned all the lamps in all the chandeliers, regardless of expense, must be attended to at once," she said. "I wonder what Mademoiselle did next. I am never quite satisfied to leave off at the climax of a story."

"She put out the gas, I fancy," answered Margaret, "folded up her dress and put it away, blessing the kindly fates that it was paid for."

Mrs. Updegraeff took a fancy to Margaret at once, and accordingly turned her back on Miss Devereux, and challenged the full attention of the stranger and interloper, who, ten minutes before, had been apparently forgotten, but who had now become the most animated person in the room. The oppression which had weighed down Margaret's heart and given her a lump in the throat was gone; she could listen and talk with mobility and brilliancy. She made no mistakes; she did not set herself to melt the ice about her, but was content to throw a few sunbeams over it, which, even against their will, the icebergs were compelled to refract and glance back to her. Mrs. Charlton was glad enough to have her protégée shine, and would have helped her had she needed help. Mrs. Updegraeff, having yielded at once to Mrs. Kent's charm, found the lunch-party, which until now had been unbearably dull, suddenly enjoyable. Margaret had never talked better in her life; there could be no lack of material, she felt, in the midst of people who had been everywhere and done everything, and need in no respect be restricted by the

tight fit which belongs only to the ignorant. Hence, she talked of whatever interested her, and startled everybody in the room by the unexpectedness, the picturesqueness and ease with which she embodied whatever had impressed her fancy and feeling.

She had a success, and had won it right honorably. Still, she was not elated by it, nor could she take comfort in it. It was easy for her to perceive that she had made a sensation, but it was like making a circle by a leap in the centre of the illimitable ocean, which grows and grows ever wider in its orbit, but settles nowhere. What she wanted was to reach the distant shore and touch earth again.

"She is the most charming woman in New York," Mrs. Updegraeff said when Mrs. Kent had gone home. "I don't wonder that Tom and George go nowhere else. I would run after her myself; but then Sidney might be bewitched with her too, so self-preservation forbids."

CHAPTER X.

MISS LONGSTAFFE IN A NEW LIGHT.

GLADYS meanwhile had been left alone, and had set about a task which made her heart beat and her cheeks burn. She could not absolutely be certain of having gained her mother's consent that she should write to her father, for Margaret's compliant answer had come so easily as to seem inadequate. But at least she had not been denied; and Gladys felt, with some vague recognition of all the wonderful consequences which might loom behind her action, that she must do it. For five days she had looked forward to this opportunity of being alone and uninterrupted; but now that it had come, she was terrified by the very silence and solitude she had coveted. It was a quarter to two when her mother and Miss Longstaffe set out, and she felt quite sure of not being disturbed before four o'clock. But that was not so very long, and there was clearly not a moment to waste. She at first took her seat at her mother's desk, but not an idea came at her bidding. It seemed desirable to carry her portfolio to her usual seat, where the fire could crackle and sing to her, and the blue tongues of flame leap up. Accordingly, she settled herself on a stool, drew a chair before her,

arranged her ink and portfolio, seized her pen and began to write.

"My dear, long-lost Papa: You must not count my love with my forgetting to remember to write, for it has not been long that I have been grown up so large I could write except in my copybook. Now that I am grown up I will say what comes to me all the time in my thoughts and that is why do you stay so long away, papa, my dear papa, — my own only papa. For mamma I am sure she wants you. Think how happy we should be with you. There is nobody like mamma, nobody — of all the ladies who were here that day she was the sweetest and the grandest. And if I am not worth coming home to see, I may grow better. I will try. Papa, why don't you come? I dream about you —"

This composition had taken time. It had been written out quite fair once; then a huge blot had suddenly descended on the middle of the sheet, and Gladys had to turn to a new one and begin it all over again. She was a little in doubt how to end it, and was composing one form after another and just making up her mind to sign herself simply "Your loving daughter, Gladys Kent," when a tap came at the door. She looked up at the clock in dismay, and discovered that it was already past four, and with some trepidation called out, "Come in." She hardly knew of what she was afraid, but when she saw Colonel Weir's ruddy face, she experienced a sense of relief.

"Why, my dear Miss Gladys," said he. "All alone? The ladies have not got back from the party

yet? I was on my way up town and I thought I would drop in. You don't mind my staying, eh?"

Gladys did mind, but she did not give word to her thought.

"What are you doing? Writing a letter, eh?" asked Colonel Weir. "Not a love-letter yet, I suppose. To your papa, perhaps."

Gladys looked up at him with dilated eyes.

"Please don't tell anybody," she said pitifully. "I am not so sure mamma will like to have me do it. She said I might, but she was joking, perhaps."

Colonel Weir sat down, looking honestly puzzled.

"Let me see it," said he. "It will do no harm, and I will never breathe a word to anyone alive. I am an old fellow who knows the world. Let me see it."

It may be Gladys was glad to share the responsibility; and, in a way, Colonel Weir was a favorite of hers for his prompt soldierly ways, and his equable temper. She passed him her sheet with a sigh of relief, and watched him eagerly while he read it.

"That is a very good letter," said he, seriously. "I fancy it had better go. You haven't signed your name."

"No, but I will;" and she wrote it out large and fair.

"Do you know your father's address?" Colonel Weir now asked.

"I have heard mamma say she never sent anything to him except care of Brown & Fiero, but that was long ago."

"Brown & Fiero," repeated the colonel. "Shall I direct it? It is Rio Janeiro, isn't it."

There could be no doubt that Gladys had secured an efficient ally; the envelope was directed and sealed, even stamped.

"I think I'll go out and put it in the box," remarked Colonel Weir, "and then I'll come back. Don't ever tell of me, Gladys," he said, with emphasis. "But who knows?—it may be everything to your father to have that letter."

"I won't tell," said Gladys, bursting into tears, "and you mustn't tell of me."

"By Jupiter," Colonel Weir said while he went out to post the letter, "Mrs. Kent is too pretty a woman to be left alone in this way. Her husband is either a knave or a fool."

With this summary action, backed by these succinct opinions, Colonel Weir put the letter into the lamp-post, and came back to find the Updegraeffs and two or three others grouped about Gladys, who was entertaining them with much stateliness and making them cups of tea of surprising strength. The child's color rose when she saw him return, and, presently, when Margaret came in she was so startled by this crimson flush, that her first thought was to put her hand to her little girl's forehead, and ask if her head ached and if her throat were sore.

"Charming maternal solicitude," said Tom Updegraeff. "But you see that it is only the fever of excitement which has taken hold of Miss Gladys. It is her first experience *de tenir le salon*."

"It will not be her last," remarked Colonel Weir.

Gladys looked meekly and deprecatingly at her mother. It troubled her conscience to think of her secret, and even Colonel Weir's little nod of insight and sympathy for her state of mind did not re-assure her. But there was no chance for her to speak now. All the men were pressing eagerly about Mrs. Kent, offering compliments, asking questions, and making comments which forced Margaret to bite her lip. She knew very well with what expectation the group had gathered. Often enough she had diverted them with satire and mimicry after going through some novel experience, and they were counting on it now. She was, however, far from being in a mood to exert herself for their amusement. A telegram had been put into her hand as she reached her own doorsteps, which opened up so wide a field of conjecture that she felt disinclined to give her mind to anything else.

"You don't tell us anything, Mrs. Kent," said George Updegraff. "It is perfectly safe. Charlton has not come, and we are all models of discretion. But I see how it is, — now that you are admitted to the select heaven of the best society, you are going to turn dull and dreary like other women."

"Dull and dreary Mrs. Kent never could become," said Colonel Weir. "But naturally the exclusive society of her own sex has some depressing effects."

"Did they bore you very much, Mrs. Kent?"

"They did not bore me at all. I am not so easily bored. If the ladies had not been all brilliantly

clever, many of them were extremely pretty, and had they been neither clever nor pretty, their gowns would still have been worth looking at. Then, too, the feast is to be eaten — and if one is not hungry for it, there are still the china and crystal and the floral decorations.”

“How good-natured you are! But I see very well that you were horribly bored,” said Tom Updegraff. “As for the women being beautiful and brilliant, I’ve been too often to the masquerade to take your word for there being more than one handsome woman there. And, with a gown like the one you are wearing, you must have a soul above their gowns. As for china, and crystal, and greenhouse plants! — no, you had a stupid time, Mrs. Kent; and depend upon it, you’ve come home sadder and wiser, not disposed to underrate the superior charm of your old friends, who love your ingle-nook. Don’t mind telling tales out of school. We all know that you women die of ennui the moment you are left to each other’s unspoiled society.”

Margaret laughed lazily and shook her head.

“What did you have for lunch?” inquired Colonel Weir. “I like to know what people eat.”

“Oh, I can tell you that. I took pains to count the courses just for your sake. There were ten.”

“Ten courses! No wonder you are a little overpowered.”

“We began with *bouillon* and oysters; then there were some little balls of fish, and very good too; next some birds and afterwards some *petites timbales à la Reine des Cœurs*, which were quite a sensation.”

"What were they made of?" asked Colonel Weir, eagerly.

"Nobody could decide. Everybody considered them very delicious, and some said there were truffles in them, while others declared they were made of oysters. Nobody knew, and Mrs. Charlton only laughed and said her cook liked his own little secrets."

"What did they taste like to you, mamma?" asked Gladys.

"They tasted a good deal like the bottle Alice found in Wonderland, which said on the outside, 'Drink me.'"

"That tasted like cherry-tart, custard, pineapple, roast turkey, taffy, and hot buttered toast," explained Gladys, joyfully.

"At least the *petites timbales* were very good," pursued Margaret. "I ate mine up with all the sauce, for one suited the other just as well as you and I suit each other, Gladys. The sauce had little capers in it, by the way."

"You must be the sauce, then, and I the other thing," said Gladys, much to Tom Updegraeff's edification.

"But now, Mrs. Kent," inquired Colonel Weir, anxiously, "did you not detect the faintest flavor about those timbales? Could you not tell if they were macaroni?"

"Oh, no; not macaroni, surely."

"Chopped fish or meat?"

"They seemed as solid and homogeneous as cheese."

"Don't you suppose they may have been oysters?"

"They did not taste to me like oysters."

"The idea of wasting a dish like that upon a ladies' lunch-party. I call it throwing —"

"Pearls before swine."

"Hardly so bad as that. But it is an undisputed fact that women know nothing and care less about what they eat. Give us the rest of the courses."

"I confess that after I had eaten the *timbales*, I talked more than I had at first, and I could not give my whole mind to eating and drinking. There were sweetbreads, and green peas, and some of Augustine's croquettes from Philadelphia, and finally strawberries and ices. Altogether it was a very sufficient meal. I shall eat nothing but a piece of bread and butter to-night.

"Too much of a meal," declared Colonel Weir, positively. "A luncheon like that—two o'clock—is an instance of misdirected energies, of misguided hospitality."

"Weir is envious," said Tom. "It is the most affecting thing in the world to Weir that he can't eat all the meals being prepared at the moment. He hates every man he sees going into Delmonico's; and to hear that the gentler sex enjoy opportunities beyond his own, disgusts him."

"Of course it does. Now, every one of you ladies, Mrs. Kent, would have been just as happy over a simple roast chicken with cranberry sauce, and a cup of tea afterwards. I dare say you had a different wine with every change of plates."

"Of course we had. There were two kinds of champagne: one which was poured into tumblers, and the other into high glasses."

"Champagne in tumblers! By Jupiter!"

"And sauterne, and chablis, and sherry,—"

"Don't go on," interrupted Tom Updegraeff. "Thackeray tells about a lady he saw at a grand dinner, who ate seventeen dishes. Up to the twelfth, he declared, she had a chance of becoming Mrs. Titmarsh, but at that point he mentally resigned her."

"Quite right, too," said Colonel Weir. "I have no Byronic fastidiousness: I like to see a woman eat heartily so long as she eats simply. But I always mistrust a female gourmet. No woman with a heart is a gourmet. She probably has a working organ which transmutes edibles into good rich blood, but not a heart to throb with the gentler emotions—to aspire, to long, to—"

"I foresee scant rations for Weir's wife,—if he ever has one," said Tom Updegraeff; and after the laugh which followed, everybody went away.

It was a relief to Margaret to be left alone. She had talked without any consciousness of what she said, and listened without gaining an idea of what was going on. She was conscious of excitement, but, instead of feeling stimulated under these new tumults of feeling, trembled as if at some painful presentiment, which made her listless, agitated, helpless. Gladys knelt at her feet and clasped her hands on her knees; and she begged her to run away, in a tone which made the child decide not to tell her story

until later. Margaret had half promised to dine with Miss Longstaffe, at the house of the latter's aunt; but she now declared that she should stay at home with Gladys, that nothing should tempt her away from her fireside that night. Miss Longstaffe found nothing singular in this decision. She herself would have preferred to remain where she was, but, being one of those faithful people who are always under the urgent necessity of performing the duties in life which others leave undone, she set out presently, tired and grim, to fulfil her engagement.

"Now for a beautiful, happy evening," said Gladys, the moment she was left alone with her mother. "I may sit up late — quite late — may I not, mamma?"

"On the contrary, you are to go to bed early — quite early," retorted Margaret.

"You are going out, then, after all?"

"No, Gladys."

"Somebody is coming to see you?"

"Yes."

"I wonder who it is," mused Gladys, standing before her mother, and looking down at her as she lay back against the cushions of a wide, deep easy-chair. "May I guess who it is?"

"No, you witch; why should you guess? Do not I always tell you all that I do, and all about the people I see? Dr. Walton is coming to see me. I had this despatch from him."

She untwisted the paper, which had not left her hand since she came in.

"Read it to me, mamma."

Shall call to-night at eight. Hope to find you.

A. WALTON.

"It came from Philadelphia," said Margaret. "Certainly, when a man comes all that distance to see me, I ought to stay at home and receive him. Ought I not, Gladys?"

"Why didn't you tell Miss Longstaffe, mamma? Did you think that perhaps she would not like it?"

"No, dear. There can be no reason for Miss Longstaffe's minding. One does not always say everything at the moment, except to one's own dear little girl."

Gladys felt a twinge at the recollection of her own secret. Still, there seemed to her at this moment something so incongruous in the fact of her having written a letter to her father that it did not fit into the present condition of things at all. She decided to wait until a new day before telling her story.

"But you will tell Miss Longstaffe to-morrow?" she persisted.

"I shall tell her to-night, when she comes in. But it is more than likely that she will come back in time to find Dr. Walton here."

Gladys caught her mother's face between her two hands, and kissed her on both lips and eyes.

"You do everything exactly right, mamma," she said, with deep significance. "Whatever you do, I know it is right."

Margaret laughed softly, folded her arms about the child and drew her on her lap. She had had no play of brightness for her guests, but now she began to

narrate all sorts of droll incidents which her quiet eyes and ears had noted at the lunch-party. Gladys listened, but with her mind half taken up with her own secret, and with her eye on the clock; and when half past seven came she insisted on going to bed.

"You may sit up as long as you like," said Margaret, who could not resist a little flutter of self-consciousness to-night under her child's gaze. "There is no real reason why you should go to bed, except that in well-ordered houses little girls are kept out of sight."

"This must be a well-ordered house," said Gladys. "I will keep out of sight."

Dr. Walton, punctual to the moment, rang the bell while the clock was striking eight. Margaret was standing before the fire as he entered the room. Their eyes met and each looked into the other's face with a questioning and serious gaze before either spoke. He had taken her hand and held it a moment in silence.

"You are all alone?"

"My little girl has just gone to bed. Miss Longstaffe is dining out."

"I am so glad to find you alone. Had you any engagement?"

"Except for your message, I might have gone with Miss Longstaffe to her aunt's."

"I was afraid I might upset some plan of yours — but—I wanted to see you. And when I want a thing, I am the most impatient of men. I am just

off the cars. I return to Philadelphia at midnight. But there are some hours between now and then."

Margaret was forced to drop her eyes. She seemed never to have met him face to face before, and the brilliancy of his glance startled her. He looked strong, resolute, above all happy. He led her to the sofa, seated her there, and drew a chair in front of her. "Look at me," he said, with a half-laugh.

She did look up, rallying her powers and putting some archness and mischief into her face. "Tell me," said he, "tell me you are glad to see me."

"But I do not know whether I am glad or not."

"Shall I go away?"

She shook her head.

"Then tell me what you mean?"

Margaret did not, however, explain her words, and it was evident that he interpreted them flatteringly to himself; for he smiled at her, and urged her no more.

"You shall have your little mystery," said he; "but I am more frank. I should like to be very frank. Why should the mere conventionalities of life — the fact that we are not old acquaintances — prevent my telling you that it is delightful to see you again? To look into your face, to hear your voice, is like the coming of dawn to a sick man, after a feverish night full of visions."

"Oh, you are no sick man, Dr. Walton," said Margaret. "You are, instead, eminently sound and sane. You see no visions, dream no dreams."

He laughed. "You know men. Does it seem to you a wholly rational and sane proceeding to rush on here, in the midst of pressing occupations which ought to keep me ninety miles away?"

"Your uncle has given you a character for wisdom and discretion not easily lost. He has told me more than once that he stood half in awe of your standards; that you seem not to have been compelled like the rest of us to begin at the beginning and find out things for yourself, but to have recognized at the start what was wisest and best, and acted on it."

"What a horrible prig you must have thought me; that is, if you thought of me at all."

"How could I help thinking of you? And do you know, Dr. Walton, I came very near meeting you last summer. When I went abroad last April, Mr. Bell was more than a little concerned about the prudence of my undertaking. I had little money. I could not think of commanding the expensive services of a courier, and he figured me to himself helpless before difficulties, passive, bewildered, kneeling in despair, lifting my hands to heaven before guide-books, extortionate landlords, pickpockets, with the diligences and railway trains I had missed vanishing in the distance. Accordingly, he wrote a letter to you, which I was to carry about with me, never once parting with it, to be despatched the moment the catastrophe arrived which he so obligingly predicted was to throw me on your mercies."

"I wish it had — I wish with all my heart it had."

"Thank you. But it did not. Of course, we were

dreadfully poor — Miss Longstaffe and I; but we really got on very well. When we reached Lucerne we stopped for two nights at the Hôtel Beaurivage, and there learned the fact that you were in the house. Naturally, as you were my appointed deliverer, I had some curiosity to see you, and decided to send my card to you as soon as I was refreshed by a good night's sleep; but next morning by seven o'clock you had gone on."

"Were you actually in Lucerne in August, under the same roof with me?"

"Miss Longstaffe and I were both there."

"I remember that last evening at Lucerne very well. I sat on the balcony talking to Miss Devereux until it was quite late."

In spite of a strong effort on her part, Margaret's features betrayed her. She could not hear him speak of Miss Devereux without a peculiar flash of emotion across her face.

He looked at her with eagerness, and seemed to be on the point of saying something, which he finally left unsaid, and only remarked coolly,

"I travelled with the Devereux most of the summer, and returned with them in October. As a boy I was almost like a son of the house; John Devereux and I were great friends and college chums. He died, poor fellow, just before he was to graduate."

"I met Miss Devereux at Mrs. Charlton's lunch to-day."

"Indeed! It needs a long acquaintance to find out the worth, and perhaps the charm, of that young lady.

All the family hold themselves in rigid grooves. But tell me," he went on, changing his tone to one of more animation, "tell me where you had been when you came to Lucerne, and what was your route afterwards."

He was curious to hear about her journey, and Margaret found herself giving explicit and categorical answers to all he asked. He was not slow in making the discovery that the two ladies, if they had not been at the expense of a courier, yet had enjoyed the advantage of some indefatigable male attendant. He seemed relieved from some anxiety when this cavalier proved to have been Roger Charlton.

"I am glad you had Charlton to rely on," he observed. "He is young, but consummately adult for such a callow fledgling, and knows how to hold himself in check and behave with good taste."

"He was a solid comfort."

"I can't help owing him a grudge for hindering you from sending me that letter. Had he not been with you, you must have needed me over and over."

"You could not have left the people you were with."

"Oh, yes, I took pains to be independent. Nothing is more irksome than to be hampered by the movements of a large party with servants and luggage. I would have flown to you like a winged Hermes."

"I should never have ventured to send for you. When you were in the same house at Lucerne, naturally I wished to see you — if only for Mr. Bell's sake.

The truth is, Miss Longstaffe and I were shy of strangers. We could joke about our poverty with Mr. Charlton, balance possibilities and expedencies, and enforce economies upon him. But the moment we were thrown with rich travellers they ran us into expenses which frightened us out of our wits. 'Only twenty francs apiece,' they would say of some project for spending a day. Now, we were well aware what twenty francs apiece had to do for us. We had a certain amount to spend; and if we were to come to the end of that, Heaven help us! You should have heard Sarah, while making up our daily accounts, pressing me concerning some deficit of four sous. 'Surely,' she would sternly insist, 'you must have some idea of what you did with that money. One cannot spend four sous without having something to show for it.'"

Dr. Walton found this deliciously comic, and laughed heartily. He was leaning forward listening insatiably to Margaret, while every moment she took a deeper and deeper hold upon his admiration. He found her more beautiful than any woman he had ever seen before, — in fact, until now he had never experienced intoxication at a woman's beauty. The lines of her form in the rich dark gown were perfect. Above the rounded shoulders and bosom rose the full babyish white throat holding the exquisite head, which leaned against the cushions of the sofa with some languor. A vague, childlike smile — the smile of an awakening and happy consciousness — played incessantly about her lips, and her eyes were full of soft light.

"I find something delightful in your allusions to your economies," he said. "Not, however, that I quite believe in them. The idea of your doing anything except on a lavish scale is beyond my imagination."

"People always say that," said Margaret, naïvely. "I am so glad I do not look poor; it is bad enough to be poor. But Mr. Bell knows—he will tell you—that I have no money at all except what I earn."

The color rushed to Dr. Walton's face. He actually stammered as he repeated her words.

"No money but what you earn—"

"That is—Miss Longstaffe and I live together. She has an income of a few hundreds from her father's estate. Everything else she or I spend comes from what she makes by her pictures and I by my writings."

He was strongly moved. He took her hands between his, pressed them hard, and then dropped them.

"You surprise me," he said, with energy. "It is a cruel, bitter thing to me that you may have had cares and anxieties."

"Plenty of both. But then," she added, laughing, "did you never realize that the pleasures of life lie in the contrast they afford to our cares and anxieties?"

"I knew that you wrote," Dr. Walton went on, without noticing her words. "Let me confess with remorse that I was stupid and brutal enough to be half repelled by the fact that you were a literary

woman; now it touches me, — you would not half believe how deeply and closely it touches me. How long — how long since —” he broke off, then began again — “how long have you been thus dependent on your own exertions?”

Her eyes met his, and she smiled with an odd, sad little droop at the corner of her lips.

“Ever since Gladys was two years old — now she is eight.”

“Six years! Six long years. Tell me,” he went on, with sudden vehemence, “tell me something of your husband.” But as he spoke the obnoxious word he started up flushing crimson. “No,” said he, with plenty of intensity of look and tone, “tell me nothing about your husband.”

There was a moment’s pause, which Margaret broke.

“I am glad to have you know that I am poor,” she said, with simple directness and dignity. “It gave me a feeling that I was practising some deception when you were here at the time of my musicale, and I allowed you to go on alluding to people as if I were a woman with money and friends and an assured position, free to do what I chose and draw the society I wanted around me. It was an accidental circumstance that all those people had been here, and yet I seemed to let you go on believing that actually I belonged to the great world.”

“I assure you, Mrs. Kent, I put you in a sphere of your own. Had I my own wish, I should isolate you there, out of everybody’s reach except my own —

you may as well understand that at once. What do you suppose has been tormenting me all these days? The thought that you were here in the very heart of a great city, accessible, irresistibly attractive — ”

Dr. Walton had come on from Philadelphia spurred by an impulse the actual meaning of which he had not wholly measured. He had wanted to see Margaret again, and from the moment he saw her he had been controlled by a single thought. There was no doubt in his own mind concerning the feeling she stirred in him. He was in love with her, and his love contained all the force and impetuosity of a first passion. He had at this moment one clear, definite intention, and that was to win her for his wife; and the moment she defined her circumstances to him, he felt the necessity of haste, and to all social superstitions and conventions was as indifferent as the first man on the first day. Not that an hour before he had intended to broach the subject of marriage to-night; but under the spell of her beauty, and more or less swayed by jealousy of other possible suitors — above all, urged by the thought that she needed some man to take care of her — he was ready to utter words which in the boldest and simplest way declared him to be her suitor.

Fate, however, had interposed many barriers between Dr. Walton and Margaret Kent, but at this moment the one which seemed most palpably effective was Miss Longstaffe, who, at the moment he was calling Margaret “irresistibly attractive,” entered the room, and at once advanced, with a stiff hand extended and a dry greeting on her lips.

“How do you do, Dr. Walton?”

Dr. Walton rose, took the proffered hand, bowed over it and replied as if in a dream. Nothing could be clearer than the fact of his surprise at such an unwelcome interruption. He gazed at Miss Longstaffe blankly, and his eyes remained fastened upon her while she drew a chair close beside him, and with a fluent, unhesitating, and undeviating stream of talk usurped the field. It was usually Miss Longstaffe's apology for a consistent taciturnity that she had nothing to say, but to-night no such slight impediment was allowed to stand in the way of her loquacity. She told Dr. Walton that she had been out to dinner—that she had, in fact, been dining with some of her relatives—with her aunt, indeed, who was her father's sister, and lived on Washington Square with her two daughters, a grandson, and a pet dog called Toby. She related anecdotes of her aunt, of her cousins, then of both generations. Next she took up the theme of Toby's sagacity, Toby's attachment to his mistress,—his jealousies, his loves, his hates. Did Dr. Walton like dogs? she inquired. His measured assent by no means diverted her from the subject. From a particular instance she extended her survey to the whole canine species; she recalled all the dogs she had ever known—dogs long since passed into the paradise of dogs—white dogs, black dogs, great dogs and little dogs, mastiffs, setters, spaniels, and greyhounds. She went on and on like a chapter on animals, giving facts, theories, instances, and illustrations.

"Dear Sarah," Margaret said after a time, trying to stem the torrent, "you are certainly in high spirits. I never knew you more entertaining. I am quite certain you have sold a picture — or had one ordered, at all events."

"I have," said Miss Longstaffe, at once transferring her unequalled powers of garrulity to a new subject. "Did I not tell you that a lady wants a sea-study in water-colors, three feet by sixteen inches? She told me she had just such a place, and that so few pictures fitted — that she had been to exhibition after exhibition and found nothing sufficiently narrow. Accordingly, I promised to paint her a coast scene, giving just enough sky to put in a gull or two. She left everything except the size to me, and I liked the order very much. I am to have one hundred dollars for it, and I can, I think, do it in three mornings, if not in two. I have the study in my sketch-book; all I shall have to do will be to draw the sky-line down a little. I do not imagine that she is particular; although she has already a good many paintings, she is considerably in the dark as to their merits. She begged me to tell her the meaning of a few phrases which she had heard and learned to repeat, but hardly ventured lest she should misapply them; for instance, 'breadth of tone,' 'out of drawing,' 'chiar-oscuro,' and 'study of values.' She added that she really did want to know enough about art to criticise the pictures she saw. I told her she might use these terms boldly — that everybody did — that all a critic needed was a smattering gained from

handbooks of art, and some knack at English composition — that any real knowledge of the subject, no matter how elementary, was liable to deprive one of ease in giving a point-blank opinion. But how, she now asked, was she to know a water-color from an oil painting? With a paper margin, of course, she recognized the difference; she had generally believed that only water-colors were framed under glass, but had lately discovered that certain pictures in oils were also framed under glass." Miss Longstaffe was pouring all this blandly into Dr. Walton's ear, transfixing him at the same time with a gaze like a basilisk's. As she paused he moved as if to free himself from an unbearable thralldom; but, as if fearing to lose her victim, she darted forth the question,

"Are you fond of art, Dr. Walton?"

"No," he replied quietly. He rose. He could hardly have endured such an ordeal longer, in his present mood. "I must go," he said, curtly, to Miss Longstaffe. "Allow me to say good night."

"Good night," replied the artist, still animated and relentless. "If you should come again, let me know the day and the hour, that I need not miss so much of your visit."

She walked along by his side while he took Margaret's hand a moment. He made no attempt to say anything, but merely sought her eyes, and smiled as their glances met.

"And you really go back to Philadelphia to-night?" she asked.

"For three weeks more; then I shall be in New York for good."

He said this significantly, and, turning as he reached the threshold, he looked at Margaret again and smiled. "Give Gladys my love," he said, and was gone.

CHAPTER XI.

PREACHING IN THE WILDERNESS.

MARGARET allowed Miss Longstaffe to close the door, while she herself sank back on the sofa with a half laugh, nestling her head against the cushions.

"Here is Sarah in a new light!" she exclaimed.

Miss Longstaffe came swiftly up, with not a little fierceness in her look and manner.

"The man was making love to you," she murmured, under her breath, "and you were sitting there and permitting it."

"I heard no word of love — not one."

"No man ever made love to me but I knew the signs on the instant. Dr. Walton is overwhelmingly in love with you, Margaret. You know that he is."

Margaret hid her face in her hands, but they could not hide the burning blush which flamed even up to the temples, and the little pearly ears.

"He evidently fell in love with you at first sight," Miss Longstaffe pursued, bending down and dropping each sentence into Margaret's ear, in a tone fine and clear as the voice of conscience. "I have heard of love like that, read of it; but I never before saw it. He has forgotten everything for you — honor, duty, even ordinary sense and reason —"

It was impossible to mistake Margaret's agitation for anything except joy, exquisite and intense joy, as she looked up. "Don't tell me that,—I don't dare to hear it," she whispered, powerfully moved. "I should not venture to say it even to my own heart in the silence of the night."

For her consciousness had not until this instant fully registered what Miss Longstaffe so forcibly insisted on, and the realization came with an intensity which frightened her. The inner life, no matter how full of fancy and feeling, must gain some relation to the actual before it takes entire possession of our intellects. The deepest thinking over our own problem cannot go so far in establishing an idea for us as the faintest outside suggestion. Margaret's perceptions of Dr. Walton suddenly took on a new vividness, as if Miss Longstaffe's words had dispelled a veil of mist. For years her daily effort had been to push aside the impulses of her youth, her longing for love, caresses and sympathy, to forget everything except her present work and amusement. Her heart gave a great leap as she now thought of the clasp Dr. Walton had fastened upon both her hands as if he could not let them go. The sincerity, the feeling, the deep pity of his look when she told him of her want of means, came back to her. She remembered the deep flush with which he had commanded her to say nothing to him of her husband. . . . That was what it all meant—he loved her, he loved her. Her mind closed on that idea, and would admit nothing else. There was not the least thought of the future.

Her imagination took no flights; this seemed to her complete fruition. It was as if for years and years she had been in an arid land, far away from all sources of life and hope, but now had reached a spring where she could quaff a bubbling elixir which renewed youth and happiness within her.

Miss Longstaffe stood speechless looking at her, all her impulses and resolutions in confusion. She realized that she had spoken unguardedly, and might have wrought dangerous mischief. What she had first felt had been an intense indignation against Margaret for committing herself, as it seemed, to a course not only foolish and dangerous, but absolutely wrong. She had at first said to herself that she must be firm; now she said to herself she must also be wise. She stood almost in awe of these revelations of the mental conflict going on in Margaret, which she must in some measure prolong and carry on to a triumph for the right. What she had so far said had been exhilarating to Margaret. Who knew what feeling it had pampered? Miss Longstaffe was used to her companion's coquetry, to her vanity, but had little idea what she might become under the domination of a fruitless passion.

"Margaret," she said, with solemnity, "there is something I have always dreaded for you, separated as you are from your husband, and it seemed to me when I stood in the doorway to-night, and saw you and Dr. Walton looking at each other, that what I had looked forward to with a shudder had actually come to pass. I implore you for a moment to think—do

you ever think?—and see what misery it would lead you to if you gave your heart to any man alive. There is a great deal of talk about fate in the world, but it is foolish, futile talk. Everything which concerns the welfare of our immortal souls is the result of our own choice. You have been very self-sacrificing and very brave; you have given up cheerfully many things which women usually find they cannot live without. I will say this for you: in all essentials you have never been selfish, never self-indulgent. Be the same noble, good Margaret now. At this moment something may be waiting for you—an apparition in the darkness, holding out its arms.”

Miss Longstaffe stood before the cowering woman, holding out her own hands as if in counter-invitation, while she went on in her firm, clear utterance, which grew all the time more rapid and eager.

“You may be drawn towards it as if by enchantment, but it is evil. Do not yield to its temptation, Margaret. I implore you not to accept. If you consent, even for a moment, you will repent it bitterly.”

Margaret gave a cry, flung up her arms, and started to her feet.

“You ought not to have told me that he loved me,” she said, with strange abruptness, and fixing her eyes on Miss Longstaffe. “I can think of nothing else.”

“If I have done harm, God forgive me!”

“I knew,” said Margaret, almost as if speaking to herself, “I knew from the first, when he came to-night, that he had been thinking of me; but—”

She blushed again, and turned away, with something infantile in her shyness. "Don't let us say any more about it," she added presently. "It all confuses me. I cannot quite understand it. No, I cannot understand it at all. The more I think of it, the more incomprehensible it becomes."

"So it does to me," remarked Miss Longstaffe, tartly. "I confess that Dr. Walton is the last man I know whom I should take for the scoundrel he seems. But when one is befogged it is better to find safe anchorage somewhere, and not drift about. There is Gladys in the other room, and she is your sweet little daughter, to whom you are at once God's angel and God's providence; and her father is your husband, who ought to be here with you to protect you, but whom, since he is not here, you must protect."

Margaret, if she had learned little else in the world, had learned to control herself outwardly; and she controlled herself now. She went up to Miss Longstaffe, and put her arms around her: "Good, kind, faithful friend," she said. "Love me, and, so far as you can, trust me."

Miss Longstaffe felt angry with herself and with all the world. She was in doubt about her own wisdom, and was ready to call herself names. Looking back upon the incidents of the past hour, they seemed a strange phantasmagoria, in which she hardly recognized her own action as belonging to her. Her vivid impressions gained at the sight of Dr. Walton were by this time blurred and faded. How foolish

and precipitate she had been! It seemed to her that it must have been a monstrous fiction of her own imagining; for now, accepting the probabilities of the situation, it grew all the time more and more incredible that Dr. Walton, an engaged man, could have been acting the rôle she had assigned him, as lover of a married woman. She folded her arms in motherly sympathy around Margaret, and a few bitter tears fell from her eyes, and rolled against the younger woman's cheek.

"Don't cry, Sarah, don't," said Margaret. "I shall believe our universe is tottering to its fall."

"But I have been so impulsive — so tactless. I have done such infinite harm."

"Oh, perhaps not," Margaret retorted, with some mischief, — "unless you persuaded Dr. Walton you had been taking too much champagne. How you did go on!"

She burst into a peal of laughter.

"Oh, you light-hearted creature," exclaimed Miss Longstaffe. "I don't, after all, believe that you have an atom of heart. You are all coquetry and levity."

"Of course I am. Good night," said Margaret, in a heavy, sleepy tone, turning down the gas. She put the parlors in order, as was her wont, with scrupulous nicety, and then went into her own room, where a night-lamp burned in the corner. Gladys lay fast asleep, her hair thrown back over the pillow.

CHAPTER XII.

MRS. SINCLAIR WANTS SOMETHING DONE QUIETLY.

MARGARET slept ill, and woke early next day dejected and unsettled. Certainly, it was not conducive to her peace of mind to have this new element of unrest. There was monotony and narrowness in her usual occupations when she took them up, and she was glad, when the morning was half over, to have it broken by a visit, although the visitor was no one more engaging than her aunt by marriage, Mrs. Sinclair.

"I hope, my dear, I am not disturbing you," said Mrs. Sinclair, rather nervously. "I am well aware that you must be busy in the morning, and that perhaps I ought to have come later. But I particularly wanted to see you, and to see you alone; and after luncheon you might have had other visitors."

"I am delighted to see you," returned Margaret. "Sit down in that chair, and let me take your wraps. I was wishing that something would happen to enliven me. I did not feel like writing to-day, — nor even like sewing."

"I don't know about my enlivening you," Mrs. Sinclair said, with a melancholy smile. "I only

know that my object in coming is most friendly and sympathetic, and my intention most kind."

Mrs. Sinclair could never be credited with evil intentions, for she was too timid to be aggressive, and had too little knowledge of the world to believe in anything outside of her own experience, which had been of the tamest and most prosaic description. But, circumscribed although she was, Margaret was well aware that even inside the limits imposed by her visitor's intellect and temper there were dreary and wearing possibilities. She was not likely to be scolded; but to be preached to, admonished, and vaguely rebuked. She wondered what special sins she had committed the preceding day which Ethel had carried home an account of from the lunch-party. It may as well be confessed that Margaret's mind instantly reverted to certain passages which had occurred the evening before, but she said to herself that it was hardly within the bounds of possibility that her aunt should have heard that Dr. Walton had spent the evening with her.

"I always dread people when they talk about their intentions being kind. I hate being vivisected." said Margaret.

"Vivisected?" repeated Mrs. Sinclair, quite fluttered. "Oh, I shudder at that word. I would not pain anybody for the world. And above all you, Margaret. You never realized how deep an interest I have taken in you. Perhaps I have not done all I could; I have sometimes felt a little remorse at thinking that if your dear uncle had been alive, he

would have shown me how to do more. A widow is so alone — so helpless — and I may add so restricted, — with everybody managing her income, and telling her how she ought to spend it. But indeed, my dear, I have had a strong feeling for you. I have realized that you had a hard time and nobody to help you."

The tears rushed to Margaret's eyes. She was weak and a little nervous to-day, and it was easy for anything to move her.

"You have been good, and you could hardly have helped me," she said. "Sometimes it has seemed to me that I was entitled to a little more social recognition than I have received, and that you might have shown people you loved and trusted me. But all the time I understood plainly enough — at least when I was in a sensible mood — that I had nothing to do with the great world, nor it with me; and that it was the kindest thing you could do to exclude me from your gay life."

"It seemed so to me — it did seem so," said Mrs. Sinclair. "Why, now there is Ethel — she has fifteen hundred a year to dress on, and it does not begin to keep her in clothes. And where would you have been, exposed to such temptations and such competitions.

"Exactly," said Margaret, laughing. "I am very grateful to you for keeping me out of harm's way, for certainly I have no fifteen hundred a year for clothes, and no generous mamma to go to, to eke out my income."

"Yet you always look nicely. Ethel said you were exquisitely dressed at Mrs. Charlton's yesterday, and I am sure the day of the musicale everybody admired you. More than one person has spoken about you to me since. You aroused curiosity, my dear; there is something rather unique about you and your style. Then, too, people have heard that our very best young men come here frequently — Roger Charlton and both the Updegraeffs. Of course you might not like to hear all that is said about you, my dear; but it is felt that you are unusually attractive, and there is always a little jealousy of a handsome woman whom desirable men are known to admire."

"You embarrass me with all your compliments," said Margaret, honestly confounded at so unexpected a tribute, and at the same time racking her brains to discover the meaning of it all.

"It does seem to me," pursued Mrs. Sinclair, dropping her voice, "a real pity that — that —"

She paused and looked about her, frightened.

"Are we quite alone?" she asked.

"Yes; Miss Longstaffe is hard at work upstairs, and Gladys is at school."

"I am always a little nervous about portières," said Mrs. Sinclair. "I suppose because on the stage conspirators and eavesdroppers are always getting behind things. Should you mind just shaking out those folds?"

"But, dear Aunt Dora, who could be there? I have no maid, no man, — nobody. However, if you

wish it" — and Margaret shook out all the hangings, one after another, disclosing only emptiness. "Not a conspirator," she exclaimed, "not an eavesdropper. We are alone."

Nevertheless, something had terrors for Mrs. Sinclair, who changed color very much.

"Should you mind telling me," she asked, "whether you often hear from your husband?"

"I will tell you, Aunt Dora, but must beg you not to repeat it, that for about two years I have utterly lost sight of him. I wrote the last letter which passed between us."

"He never seemed to me like a good husband," said Mrs. Sinclair, as if thoroughly convinced of the originality of her idea.

"Oh, well — poor fellow — I married him," said Margaret. "After all, he is my husband."

"But, my dear, think how different he is from other husbands. He promised to love, comfort, honor, and keep you, in sickness and in health, and, forsaking all others, keep only unto you."

"I know. He has not exactly carried that out to the letter."

"Has he sent you any money?"

"No."

"Now, just think of it. When your uncle married me, it was supposed that I should come into something quite handsome at papa's death. But poor papa lost everything in '57, and, except my trousseau, I had nothing. Nevertheless, your uncle gave me a handsome house, a thousand dollars a month to keep

it up with, carriages, trips abroad. Of course I did not love your uncle merely because he was rich and generous, but there was something very satisfactory in being so well taken care of."

"I can understand that. I'm not sure but that a woman might as well worship a man for such things as for his having fine eyes and a straight nose."

"Now, your experience has been different."

"Well, rather so. If I had had what my father left me, I should have done very well; but Robert speculated with the money and lost it all."

"And has never given you anything since?"

"Nothing to count."

"Now, really, my dear — although, of course, I believe a woman ought never for a moment to forget her marriage vows — there is a limit to honor and obedience. You couldn't love and honor an imbecile, could you now?"

"Honest, hopeless imbecility, I always thought would make me very tender and pitiful."

Mrs. Sinclair looked as if she resented Margaret's softness of heart.

"Then you must be infatuated, that is all I can say," she remarked. "A man like that, who wastes your money, runs away and leaves you to pick up a sixpence as you can to feed and dress yourself and your little girl, — why, my dear, it is one of the experiences which might lead one to believe in woman's rights doctrines and female suffrage."

Mrs. Sinclair was really wrought up, her pale eyes gleamed, and her cheeks were suffused by a dull red.

She had lost her deprecating smile, and wore a look almost of resolution.

"Actually, Margaret, don't you consider that he has injured you?" she insisted.

Margaret hesitated. Something in Mrs. Sinclair's pertinacity began to sway her; she felt agitated, as if that everlasting weight upon her heart, which she had carried for years and learned how to bear without suffering, were changing its half comfortable position and galling her.

"Don't you see," she murmured, "that you ought not to put these ideas into my mind? Part of a woman's religion is the acceptance of what her marriage brings her. I could not repudiate Robert while I love Gladys as I do, for she is his child. It is to me partly as if he were dead. I feel sorrow and tenderness for him. And he may be dead. How can I tell? Sometimes I feel almost certain that he is dead."

"He is not dead," said Mrs. Sinclair, significantly. As she spoke she took from her arm a black satin reticule, and put it on her knees. "Your husband is alive, and living in Rio Janeiro."

Margaret looked at the black satin reticule as if fascinated. Her heart beat almost painfully, she was in a fever. She knew that something was coming, and looked forward to it with dread. Mrs. Sinclair, whom she had hitherto half derided, suddenly took on a strange dignity, and assumed the aspect of a fate.

"Do you want definite news concerning your husband?" she now asked.

Margaret nodded.

"Can you bear it?"

"Anything is better than this suspense."

"You will not blame me, my dear, if you are shocked and pained beyond endurance?"

"No, no, no," answered Margaret, in an agony of impatience.

"You have heard me speak," said Mrs. Sinclair, who never marred anything by over-haste, "of my sister, Mrs. Stockton; she has three sons."

"I know Mr. James Stockton; he has been here to see me."

"I have a letter from him which concerns you."

"Oh, let me see it," cried Margaret. "I cannot bear this doubt and uncertainty. End it, for Heaven's sake."

She reached out her hands, and Mrs. Sinclair, after fumbling for a moment at the strings of her bag, opened it, took out an envelope, from which she drew an enclosure and gave it to Margaret.

While Margaret was reading the three pages, there was no sound in the room except the ticking of the French clock and the soft roar of the burning coals. Mrs. Sinclair politely abstained from even glancing towards the insulted wife until two minutes were passed, which she counted by the open watch she had taken out and held in her hand. Then she said softly,

"There is no possibility of mistaking the position of affairs."

"None," said Margaret, in a calm, clear tone; and

when Mrs. Sinclair ventured to look at her niece she saw that, although she had grown pale, there was no feeble misery in her face, — rather fresh spirit and resolution. There was no appearance of any inner conflict of feeling; it was instead as if some problem were suddenly and satisfactorily solved.

"You did not love him, Margaret," said the elder woman, half regretfully, putting her hand on the fingers which still held the letter, "or you could not have borne it like this."

"I suppose I must have loved him once," said Margaret, "but I have had time to get over all that folly."

She did not lift her eyes as she spoke, but kept them fixed on the fire.

"A divorce has always seemed to me a dreadful thing," said Mrs. Sinclair, with a little shudder; "to have it all in the papers, for everybody to discuss and talk over — oh, I have hated the very idea of it, I have thought it must be wrong. But now it does seem to me that you have no other duty. My nephew is a very point-blank fellow; he has put everything painfully clear. No doubt, as he says, you might get your rights in this state, — but don't you think, dear, it would be better, more comfortable, to go to some quiet place out West and have it managed there?"

Margaret opened her large eyes and gazed at her visitor.

"Very likely," she said; "I had not thought."

Mrs. Sinclair experienced a great relief on finding that her suggestion was not rebuffed.

"Nobody would know what was going on in that case," she purred softly, "and there would be nothing embarrassing for anybody. And then, when it was all over, you might come back, and you could make almost any sort of marriage you wanted to; I am sure of that."

Margaret flushed violently. "Do not, do not," she said, with painful vehemence.

"But, my dear, I am an old woman, and I cannot help looking at it practically. You would be badly off unless you did marry at once. I should like to feel sure from the first that some man —"

Margaret sprang up.

"Let me keep the letter," she said, imperatively. "I shall need it to make me strong and hard. The moment one gets used to an idea, the sharp edges are rounded off. Perhaps reading this over will always bring me back to my first impression."

"I like your spirit. When you make up your mind what to do, you will come and tell me — will you not, my dear?"

Margaret promised. She felt in haste to be alone, and showed her wish by her fitful manner, her abstraction and her averted eyes, until Mrs. Sinclair at last reluctantly took leave. Left to the solitude she had craved, Margaret was tortured with restlessness. She crept upstairs to Miss Longstaffe's studio — but hearing voices there, went quickly back to her own room. She had enough to think about, but she was not impressed as having any conscious purpose. All her ideas came fitfully, opening up wide hori-

zons; to pass these was to reach a coveted refuge. She recognized her weakness in letting her mind gradually settle more upon this goal than upon the terrors of the journey. But she said to herself that she needed all the consolation a belief in her final happiness could give her, to bear the pain and uncertainty of the present. One spontaneous thought asserted itself over and over again,—the strangeness of the fact that this news should have reached her to-day. But she dismissed the thought of such significance with a shiver whenever it came. All her aunt's allusions involved a certain grossness of idea which she resented. She trembled before the long vague shadows, and hid her eyes from the sunlight. But after all it was a simple matter to her that she was at last going to have the right to be happy. There had always been something transitional and accidental in the scheme of things, which had seemed to deny her the full benefits of an untrammelled and generously endowed career. She had played her little melodious tunes so far on an imperfect instrument, in which more than half the notes would not sound. She now began to hope that she might have the full scale in all its keys to make music with.

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. BELL'S TROUBLES.

MR. BELL had been in a state of anxiety and unrest ever since the day of Mrs. Kent's musicale. He had thought only of Margaret, yet had not trusted himself to see her. Mrs. Townsend's calumny had struck deep; it not only wounded but rankled. He had first been fiercely indignant, but he had had time and opportunity to learn his lesson in the world; and, after pondering the whole subject, he grew more lenient not only towards Roger Charlton, but even towards the scandal-mongers. The fault lay in the very nature of Margaret's circumstances and position, and to rebel against possible misconstructions and slanders was not only useless but foolish. All the virtuous and fortunate people in the world must play the part of censors towards the vicious and unlucky, and impose certain standards. This censorship might seem unscrupulous and cruel at times; but it was the welfare of society which was in question, not that of individuals. A chief disadvantage of absolute correctness is that it shuts one out from a sympathetic knowledge of what a painful struggle life may be to those who have no money and no friends. Mr. Bell felt that he could not blame the world for find-

ing something unusual in Margaret's position. It was unlucky for any woman when her sterling qualities must be asserted and argued for in spite of appearances against them. Actual justice and clear insight are apt to be conspicuous by their absence in all social moral verdicts. These people who judged Margaret used their imaginations in other ways than in finding out the simplicity and sweetness which had kept her as yet unspotted from the world. They were acquainted with the usual faults of their own sex, and so imputed them to her. But nevertheless he desired no special moral law in Margaret's favor; he wanted her to be loved, comprehended, responded to and sympathized with by those very women who now pretended to admire but really looked askance at her.

He had gone over in memory his conversation with Miss Longstaffe many a time, had answered all her arguments, and proved her reasoning to be sentimentally futile. He had besides communicated with certain officials in Rio Janeiro, discovered Robert Kent's whereabouts, and found out how he was living, and what his outlook was. There was nothing satisfactory in the facts gained; nothing which pointed to the desirability of his return to his wife. It would have seemed to Mr. Bell indeed a gross desecration of Margaret's claims as a woman and a lady, that she should be obliged to take up with her husband again. He had for a long time felt it absolutely essential both for her and Gladys' ultimate welfare that she should be divorced from such a profligate.

It had, however, been very hard for him to act. The epoch of bold deeds was over for him. He had gone on from day to day and week to week saying that Margaret must be freed; yet he had not effected even the utterance of an opinion on the subject, except on that October afternoon to Miss Longstaffe. It had been his own love for her which made him powerless; he knew that any man to whom he spoke about the merest legal aspects of a divorce would read the whole story in his face. Until Mrs. Townsend named Roger Charlton to him as Margaret's admirer, it had never entered his mind that any other man might be in a similar quandary to his own. He was amazed at his own blindness in ascribing sluggish intellects and silent hearts to the men who sought Margaret day after day. It had seemed a simple and natural matter for him to love her, because he was old and weary, and she was so young, radiant and eager with the stirrings which he had outgrown and lost. The old must love the young, but to affirm the converse was fatally and drearily absurd; for the young can love only the young.

He had been so ready to believe that his intentions had been wholly kind and beneficent towards Margaret, that this suggestion of his having a rival operated as a painful shock. The belief that he could offer her something better than she had known, had interposed and moderated his passion; he had experienced the blessedness of generous giving. But what could he give her that Roger Charlton had it not in his

power to offer her in richer measure? — one of the best names and most assured positions in New York; enormous wealth, the accumulations of sensible and shrewd generations of business men. Then, too, Roger was young, handsome, attractive. His advantages were vivid enough before the old man's fancy; they mocked him, and he could not bear it. He took a resolution not to think any more of Margaret or of her future. He sat day after day in his study, in a sombre mood, trying to make some new plan of life. Now, he decided to start at once for the East; again, he said to himself that he did not mix sufficiently with his fellow-men: he tried to go about among them, to absorb himself in their talk and pursuits, to listen patiently and give the outcome of his own thoughts in return. He was forced after a few attempts to tell himself that his hopes, interests, and beliefs had cruelly narrowed down; he had cared for nothing but Margaret for years now, and if she were gone all was gone. I have said that Mr. Bell took the resolution not to think of her; but, nevertheless, her image hovered perpetually before him. It was not slow to occur to him, too, that, if he actually cared for her deeply, it was now in his power to do her a great service. It would certainly be the cruelest irony of circumstances for him to urge on a divorce, which should put it in the power of any man but himself to win her. But he had a passionate wish to make her happy; he felt less and less each day the necessary strength to be selfish; life and light were slipping from him; let him at least

have the reflection of her happiness in this twilight gloom in which he sat nowadays with folded hands.

One evening, toward midnight, he suddenly decided that it would be well for him to speak with Roger Charlton; and he wrote a note requesting him to call the next day. Roger had the billet at breakfast, and long before noon drove out to Silvertop, wondering more than a little at the summons. He found Mr. Bell sitting by his fire, and was at once struck by the increased age and fragility of his appearance.

"You have not been well, sir," he said. "I am most sorry to see the effect of it."

"Do I look ill?" Mr. Bell asked, with some surprise. "I have felt listless, — nothing worse."

Roger sat down, conscious that the old man bent a searching glance upon him. The young fellow was, however, a somewhat weighty person to his own consciousness, and filled his place with a punctilious behavior, which to his own imagination left nothing to be desired. Mr. Bell was, however, somewhat taken aback at Roger's excessive youthfulness. He had never before observed him closely, and lately in his thought had invested him with more heroic breadth and freedom than this formal little dandy seemed to possess. He broached his subject, nevertheless, without preamble.

"I know," he said, "that you must wonder why I have sent for you. The fact is, the welfare of a lady whom we are both proud to call an intimate friend has lately interested me deeply, and I have wished to consult some other of her well-wishers."

Roger colored high. "I think you mean Mrs. Kent," he said, quite eagerly.

"I certainly do."

"Mr. Bell," said Roger, his face aflame, "I am ready to thank you on my knees for sending for me. I have thought more than once of coming to see you. It has seemed to me such a confounded shame that here were a half-dozen of us more or less devoted to Mrs. Kent, admiring her beyond other women, finding our delight in her society, and yet that we never think of doing her any real service. I say that every man of us who know her ought to insist that she shall be rid of that scoundrel whom she still calls her husband."

"I agree with you ; I agree with you heartily," said Mr. Bell, who had, however, never spoken so dreadfully or hopelessly as now, with the sight of this passionate, glowing young face opposite him. "What can be done ?" he asked.

"You need not ask what to do," declared Roger. "You can act for her without prejudice and without bias, as if you were her father. Nobody could well venture to impugn your motives, or speak lightly of the influence she has over you. Now, don't you know the reason I have not dared to stir hand or foot is because I'm so afraid of hurting her. There would be no end of talk if I were to be mixed up in any of the legal doings. And, besides, I—I—I don't know what her wishes are. It may be she would shrink from a divorce. Of course, as any delicate woman would, she must shrink from it ; but whether she

would consent to it — now you could speak with authority — you could insist. Why, it's beastly, it's abominable, that she is allowed to be wronged in that way. She never seems to realize that she is badly used. Women have queer ideas about religious duty, all of them; but I never saw or heard of anybody who made an idol out of quite such a poor lump of clay as she does."

Mr. Bell looked at the young man as if fascinated, feeling himself to be painfully old and helpless, that he must needs be taught his duty by this half-educated boy. There need no longer be any groping for clear convictions on the subject of Margaret's destiny, — no struggle to get some light thrown on the connection between what was personal wish and will and what was beautiful and essential in the universal scheme of things.

"You speak as if you feared somebody might be bold enough to doubt your disinterestedness," he remarked, after a time.

"People do talk already," said Roger dryly. "Besides, I am not disinterested. If she were free, she would at once become my wife — that is, provided she would have me. I don't in the least feel sure that she would," he added, flushing. "I'm younger than she is, a little; and she always treats me like a boy. But she should have the chance to take me; I don't mind saying as much as that to you, Mr. Bell."

"That is honest and fair of you. But you say people do talk already; couldn't you have hindered that?"

"Constituted as women are, and since they must cackle about something," said Roger, with indignation, "I don't see how I could have prevented it. I have almost never been five minutes alone with Mrs. Kent."

"Well, what is it people say?"

"I don't know precisely what form it takes; something prejudicial to her, I fear."

"I happen to have heard it suggested that she is pecuniarily indebted to you," said Mr. Bell.

This was the slander which had stung him so deeply; for when he turned the matter over and over in his mind, it seemed painfully probable that it was true.

"I don't ask you to tell me anything about it; but if you are so well aware that your acquaintance with her is talked about, you might as well hear what form aspersion takes towards the intimacy."

Roger sprang up.

"That is infamous!" said he. "It is infamous — infamous! Do they think —"

He rubbed his forehead with his hand. He seemed mortified, confused.

"It is not true," he said, recovering himself. "It is damnably untrue. They don't know her. When I went about with her and Miss Longstaffe in Europe, it was an understood matter between me and them that I must not question their economies. We travelled second-class almost invariably, and sometimes third-class — although, to be sure, that was half for bravado. Once in a long while they would accept some

little treat from me; but that was sure to be on some great occasion. We used to have two meals a day, with a franc and a half or two francs apiece the limit. We got so expert in ordering a three-franc dinner for three people, that, after a time, we all three declared that we wanted nothing better. Not that I was always satisfied, only I should no more have ventured adding anything to the bill of fare than if I had been at a dinner-party. I never even paid her fare on a street car," Roger went on, growing every moment faster and more furious, "for she always draws the line rigidly. I may ask them to dine at Delmonico's once in six weeks or so; but if she wanted an ice when we were out walking, she would pay for it herself. I have often taken a box at the theatre for them,—but I do not call for them, I meet them there. She will never drive with me, although I have taken Miss Longstaffe and Gladys to drive often enough. She is really very particular; but when she talks she likes to amuse people, and often enough gives herself away in a manner which makes me shiver,—that is, if anybody like that Mrs. Townsend, for instance, is listening."

Mr. Bell sat mute, gazing vacantly, and comprehending at once too little and too much. What he did not sufficiently understand was, that the young fellow was vain and self-conscious, and took himself by far too seriously; where he went too far was in ascribing calculation to this inflexible attitude of Margaret's. It did seem to him an absurd fancy that she really cared for the vain boy. Sometimes while Roger was

going on he was inclined to smile; then he would remember that he himself was so old that he could not realize how youth may regard youth, and his lonely misery took deeper and deeper hold upon his heart. But these allusions to the free, untrammelled foreign life the two had led in the past summer smote him most cruelly. What opportunity and leisure for happiness! He remembered that he too had longed to go to Europe when Margaret was there, but he had feared the babble of the world. Accordingly, he had sat down with folded hands to watch her go away. Had he accompanied her, no more harm could have been done than had been done. It had been Roger Charlton who had picked up the loose threads of habit and intimacy which he had resigned, gathered them into shape, and wrought them into shining meshes which held all Margaret's memories of Europe.

"All I have ever done," pursued Roger, dropping his eyes, "that has been anything in the shape of pecuniary aid to Mrs. Kent, has been to buy any of Miss Longstaffe's pictures which happened to be thrown on the market. I don't think anybody has a right to cavil at that."

"Nobody," said Mr. Bell, with the flicker of a smile. "I have done as much as that myself. The Lady in 'Comus' could not keep herself at a higher altitude than Miss Longstaffe."

"I have schooled myself to patience," pursued Roger, who knew as much of patience as other young people who want the world altered at once to their liking. "But I think for Mrs. Kent's sake something ought to be done."

"It must be done — it shall be done," muttered Mr. Bell.

With a promise like that, Roger Charlton might have done well to go away content; but on the contrary, with youthful egotism, he now began to impose conditions and lay plans, until the elder man almost sickened of any desire to aid him. What he had always recoiled from had been selfish aims, and any insistence upon his own claims to the joys of life, which, so far from being the common lot, seemed to him exceptional and almost accidental, answering none of the prayers of the many, but coming unsought and almost uncared for to the few. He had been tortured by scruples, he had felt it necessary to fight firmly against the mastering inclination to call Margaret away from her husband to himself. But now all that he had felt seemed feeble and impotent when brought into comparison with the vigorous fibre of this young man's resolutions. He was inclined to resent the commonplace, rather vulgar aspect of the situation when it was defined by Roger, and once or twice stopped him short with something like fierceness. They were taking luncheon together, and courtesy demanded that the guest should not be ill-treated; but when at last Roger was ready to take leave, and remarked that he would come back in a few days to learn what action had been definitely decided on after Mr. Bell should have seen Mrs. Kent and his lawyer, the elder man spoke out,

"You are very young, Mr. Charlton, and I am

very old. You have the impetuous temper which belongs to your years, and I the reluctant one of mine. Honestly, it is not your happiness I am seeking."

"Why, sir," stammered Roger, "I thought —"

"Never mind what you thought," said the old man, almost testily. "You are a mere accident, — you —"

"I hope to be more than an accidental factor of Mrs. Kent's future happiness," said poor Roger, feeling it necessary to assert his own consciousness of what a Charlton was under any circumstances. He went on with a rank egotism, which he himself recognized and objected to, at the same time thinking that Mr. Bell hardly realized what supreme good fortune it would be for any woman to become his wife, and ought to have the lesson taught him at once. "Few men have it in their power to give more than I can offer to the lady who takes my name. I can offer my wife everything."

"You? You offer a woman everything?" said Mr. Bell, with some sarcasm in his glance and tone. "I wonder where you will find everything. You will have, sir, to travel far, and search hard."

But after Roger had taken leave with magnificent courtesy, Mr. Bell repented his Johnsonian thrust. It was hard, he told himself, to realize that the treasures of the world must be given over to a generation of conceited boys. Still, if this one really held the *mot d'enigme* of Margaret's future, he ought to be treated with the respect due to sincerity of motive

and honesty of intention. It seemed to him, in his present mood, more easy to write to her than to tell her in person what his views were concerning her. But it was a task of forty-eight hours, requiring all his resolution and more than his strength, to write this letter.

SILVERTOP, 17 January.

MY DEAR MARGARET, — A multitude of thoughts have been stirred in my mind, of late, concerning you, and I had determined to go to see you, and try to speak with the tongues of men and angels both. Something strange and difficult I had to urge. I needed to exhort, rouse, almost compel you to a certain course of action. I have waited for weeks, submerged in the dull pool of my troubled thoughts, hoping that the heavenly inspirer might descend. Alas! for me the day of miracles has passed. The immortals have no whispers for my ear. Words strong to move no longer come winged at my bidding. Thus I dare not seek you in person, lest I should make poor my mission by my dulness in setting it forth, and the sadness and despondency of impotent old age clog not only my tongue but my pen. I need to handle the subject with such delicacy, yet with such clearness that my definite meaning shall pierce at once into your understanding and your heart. The thing to be said is this, my poor Margaret: Your husband protects you neither with his presence nor his love; he shows no solicitude for your reputation or your credit. He has not — I speak with authority — allowed his duties to you to be any bar to a luxurious and pleasure-taking life of his own. And it seems to me that the time has come for you to shake yourself loose from what fictitious bonds he still holds over you. You must, in short, have a divorce. Your course

is impeded and limited by him. You can attain no complete happiness or usefulness while this wretched state of things endures. Beyond any woman I ever knew you best deserve to live with order and beauty in your life. A human being may do very well without happiness, — I find, indeed, that the happy people of past generations have done little; but to live in confusion, in disorder — to be perpetually running away from something, forced to dread something — that is miserable, and should not be borne if by any right and reason it may be avoided. Women find their highest duty in making use of cowardly but instinctive artifices which enable them to shirk the real difficulties of a position like yours. And you have used all your defences nobly. You have fenced with fate and parried her blows; you have wrested from despair and loss more than others gather from the happiest combinations of circumstances. But let us look the matter in the face. You need a surer position than you can command at present, both for yourself and for Gladys. If you were older, were you less attractive, it might do to let your wrongs evaporate into the blue above us. But you love pleasure so well — you draw the bright things of life so powerfully to yourself — that it inspires a dread in those who love you that enemies powerful to slander may do you harm. You must have a fresh chance, my little Margaret. You must marry the man who loves you, and whom, I believe, you love. Until *his* right was lately made clear to me, I had sometimes dreamed that mine might be the hand to gather up the ravelled threads of your life. A presumptuous dream for an old man, was it not? But the fact that such an idea had had existence in my own mind makes it all the more easy to act for you, since it is in very truth your happiness above all

things that I am seeking. If you consent to what I have suggested, all you need to do is to write, 'Yes, dear friend,' and I will see Noble at once and discuss the legal bearings of the case. I urge you not to create unnecessary hindrances. It is better for everyone concerned that there should be no delay. Yours truly,

HERBERT BELL.

CHAPTER XIV.

ALEX GOES TO SEE OLD FRIENDS.

ALEX WALTON went away from Mrs. Kent the night Miss Longstaffe broke in upon his half-declaration of love with some natural annoyance that such a check had come. At the same time he told himself that a proposal of marriage to a woman he had then met for the fifth time only would have been precipitate, not to say premature. He was willing to concede the point that he was himself madly in love; but he was far from indulging the belief that Mrs. Kent was similarly carried away by feeling. Thus, his confession must have subjected her to an ordeal he had not yet gained a right to impose. Even if she cared for him, he must have been rather brutal to constrain her to yield him her first tremblings of emotion. It was not as if she were a young girl. She must already have loved in some tranquil measure once, although she could have been only the merest child when she had given herself to that other man. A little later, he jealously told himself, he must know the worth of every throb of feeling she had hitherto experienced. He must hear the whole story of her married life, and learn to measure the worth or littleness of her dead husband. But that evening he had found it

would consent to it — now you could speak with authority — you could insist. Why, it's beastly, it's abominable, that she is allowed to be wronged in that way. She never seems to realize that she is badly used. Women have queer ideas about religious duty, all of them; but I never saw or heard of anybody who made an idol out of quite such a poor lump of clay as she does."

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"You speak as if you feared somebody might be bold enough to doubt your disinterestedness," he remarked, after a time.

"People do talk already," said Roger dryly. "Besides, I am not disinterested. If she were free, she would at once become my wife — that is, provided she would have me. I don't in the least feel sure that she would," he added, flushing. "I'm younger than she is, a little; and she always treats me like a boy. But she should have the chance to take me; I don't mind saying as much as that to you, Mr. Bell."

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"Well, what is it people say?"

"I don't know precisely what form it takes; something prejudicial to her, I fear."

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had every chance to know Elinor, and he usually liked her. Sitting with her on the balcony that evening, however, they had differed on some unimportant matter, and her persistence over a trifle, concerning which she was misinformed, had bored him. There had risen in his mind a fatal reluctance to say aloud what had been on his tongue and momentarily in his heart that afternoon. At the same moment a voice on a balcony a little above them began to chant dreamily, "There is not in the wide world a valley so sweet," only to break off presently with a laugh and the words, "Sarah, don't you know that this is absolutely sinful extravagance?"

"That's an enchanting voice and laugh," he had said to Elinor, and had continued to discuss voices and their fascination for him beyond that even of beauty, until, in her chilly, princess-like way, Miss Devereux had finally bade him good night and left him alone.

He had been on the point of telling Margaret of this episode and declaring that he now knew it to be herself who had thus sung and spoken in his hearing, but the significance was too deep to be disclosed when the story could not be fully told. Some time, a little later, he promised himself the enjoyment of telling her, looking into her arch, brilliant face the while.

He remained in Philadelphia three weeks longer, and wrote Margaret sixteen letters. At the end of that time he removed to New York, looked into his rooms, and then went out to call upon the Devereux, thinking it only fair that he should give such old

friends some indications of his present state of mind. He took the train at three o'clock, remembering that as it was a Monday he was sure to find the family at home. He could pass the afternoon with them, then go on to his uncle's to dine and spend the night. He had a comfortable feeling that he was thus disentangling himself of the sole impediment to his free action, and might the next day go to see Mrs. Kent under the happiest auspices.

He had chosen his time well. Elinor and her mother were at home, and Mr. Devereux was expected to return shortly from his ride. There was no house in the world that Alex knew better than this. Orphaned as he had been since infancy, no place in the world had just such associations for him. He was fond of taking a peep into the bedroom where he had slept when he spent his vacations with John Devereux, both as schoolboy and Harvard student, and where the well-known prints, foils, whips, rods and guns were still grouped on the walls. The old people had cherished every belonging of their only son, and Alex was to their perception a personal legacy of their own from John himself. Mrs. Devereux was fond of Alex, and it was her conception of duty to do everything that could be done for those she loved. Gladly would she have been a mother to him, and taken advantage of that intimate and unique position to preside over his life; nothing could have seemed to the old lady more natural and fitting. Their divinity so hedged in the Devereux that it was impossible for them to be dependent on any

fellow-creature, since they reclined at ease above the accidents of this world, like gods and goddesses upon Olympus; otherwise Mrs. Devereux might have confessed the sore grievance which tore her heart—which was that Alex neglected them, that he did not make an offer of marriage to Elinor, and that he was interested in other people and other pursuits than their own. Elinor may similarly have found him lacking in the devotion and alacrity which should kindle the actions of all the subjects of the Devereuxs. Both ladies, nevertheless, greeted him with a delicate cordiality, remarked that it was a cold day, and that Mr. Devereux was out taking his constitutional on horseback.

“Which he finds it necessary to do, you know, Alex,” said Mrs. Devereux, plaintively. “Dr. Brainard says that nothing else can keep him in health. But I must confess that I do consider that it makes him very sleepy after dinner to go out on these cold bleak days.”

“Of course it does,” responded Alex; “but being sleepy after dinner is healthy and natural. Who is there who is not sleepy after dinner? I am, I know.”

“I am not,” said Mrs. Devereux. “I have never been used to going to sleep after dinner. And how could I in old days, with a roomful of people all full of agreeable things to say? I confess I find my quiet evenings very dull and monotonous. Elinor is so much in town that the whole entertainment of her papa falls upon me. I say the entertainment—

but I flatter myself in saying that; he does not grant me the privilege of entertaining him at all. When I talk to him, he answers, 'Yes, my dear,' once; and then he is asleep, quite fast asleep, and does not wake up till bedtime. Sometimes I insist on his playing whist; and if Elinor is not here, I have Miss Penny come in and play with a dummy. But he yawns so that he absolutely frightens me."

"Don't you think, Dr. Walton," said Elinor, "that we ought to go into town in the winter? Even if we did not live in our own house, we might have rooms somewhere. Or Isabel would be enchanted to have mamma and papa with her for months at a time."

"But you know, Elinor, very well, that your papa does not want to be in town. He does not care about New York nowadays. He knows nobody, and he desires to know nobody. The moment the new people are mentioned to him, he just exclaims, 'Don't know him at all. Never heard of him in my life.' And I can hardly blame him, poor dear man," went on Mrs. Devereux sadly, "for I too know nobody — nobody. Why, Alex, I went to a wedding the other day — my cousin Mrs. Vandervoort had asked me to go, for Fred is trying to marry one of the sisters of the bride (each of the five girls is to have a million) — well, as I say, I attended this wedding, and it was the strangest experience of my life." Mrs. Devereux's voice was sepulchral.

"What was the matter with it?" asked Alex, cheerfully. "As a rule, nothing is so jolly, I think, as one of those weddings where, as old Rogers said once, 'Nobody's son marries anybody's daughter.'"

"I told mamma it was quite out of her way to go," said Elinor, lifting her hands with a motion as if washing them of the vulgarity which had for a moment contaminated the family. "She would insist that as Fred Vandervoort had no other chance in the world he ought to be helped on a little in his wooing. I told her she would know nobody there."

"I am used to knowing nobody — one has to bear that in New York nowadays. I look round the rooms, when I go out, without seeing a familiar face. But then, although people are unfamiliar, they need not be so hideously unfamiliar as those McElraths. Fancy them, having a good old name like that — McElraths! The McElraths were very respectable and lived in Bleecker Street when I was a girl. But these McElraths were dreadful — dreadful. Alex, you never saw anything so fearful; they all had tusks."

"Fancy going to see people with tusks like boars," said Elinor.

"I hope they did not gnash them at you, Mrs. Devereux," said Alex.

"But they did. There were father and mother and five daughters and two sons, and all with tusks," said Mrs. Devereux, with a shudder. "I felt myself in a den of wild beasts. The bride had tusks and smiled incessantly, and I felt sorry for her husband, although he was too unpleasant-looking to come easily within the pale of my sympathies. And they were all so pleased to see me, and so enormously polite — I say enormously, for nothing else seems to express it, they all opened their great cavernous

mouths so wide and showed their tusks so frightfully."

"But then you know, dear Mrs. Devereux," said Alex, "that some very nice people have tusks. Honestly, didn't you ever look about a most select dinner-table and see some very odd features? Old Mrs. Vandewater now,—she always was my idea of the witch of Endor; she has regular fangs."

"Mrs. Vandewater is a third cousin of my own," said Mrs. Devereux, a little stiffly. "Certainly no one could be more perfectly respectable than Mrs. Vandewater; she was a Vanderduynck. The Vanderduyncks may have prominent teeth, but I never considered it a deformity."

"I call Mrs. Vandewater a very patrician-looking woman," said Elinor. "She always makes me think of Lady Kew. It is no use, Dr. Walton, trying to make me believe that you consider that those strongly accented features which mark many of our best families are to be compared to the deformities and excrescences of underbred people. You no more believe in such nonsense than I do."

Alex laughed. "Do tell me more about the wedding, Mrs. Devereux," said he. "I'm interested in these millionnaires. Why shouldn't I make up to one of the girls myself, and then I might make it a matter of scientific research to discover the difference between the plebeian and aristocratic tusk."

Mrs. Devereux regarded her visitor a little pensively, thinking how strange it was that a young man like Alex, who had always been in her own set, and

whom such correct people rejoiced to know, could joke in this tasteless manner.

"They were all magnificently dressed," she said, plaintively. "The bride's dress and veil were of point d'alençon and made to order—actually made to order; the most beautiful pattern! And she wore exquisite pearls. I confess I never saw more superb gowns than all those people had on. Think of it, magnificent jewels and gowns from Worth and Pinot, and yet I scarcely knew one of the people who wore them. Then the presents—masses of gold and silver plate, the richest porcelain, and everything that is beautiful."

"That sort of display is wretchedly vulgar," said Elinor.

"But, my dear," said Mrs. Devereux, deprecatingly, "when Isabel was married we had her presents all set out just in that way, and I confess I felt quite proud of them."

"But that was long ago," explained Elinor. "All those dreadful people who are doing these things now had not come in then. We could go on in our own fashion, quite certain that few could equal and none eclipse us."

"Exactly," said Mrs. Devereux, "and it was so pleasant then. Wherever I went I knew all the people, or if I did not know everybody I could go out of my way to befriend a stranger, sure that my little touch of patronage would be appreciated. Now, oh! dear me, these people I don't know patronize me—that is, they try to. I just smile at them—and I grow stiff and cold all over."

"You know how a sea-anemone feels when something strange and unfamiliar threatens it," suggested Alex.

Mrs. Devereux, however, knew nothing about sea-anemones, and no form of life so rudimentary could have been supposed to feel with her feelings and be impeded and depressed by her repugnances. Little as there might appear of subtlety in the foregoing conversation, it was nevertheless a masterly presentment of a subject concerning which the good lady and her daughter had made up their minds to attack Dr. Walton the first time they should see him. "I confess," Elinor went on to remark, "there seems to me little or no comfort nowadays, when one is outshone in every way by people one does not know and prefers never to have heard of. I think sometimes I will not have my gowns from Paris any more—that I will set the fashion of dressing very simply. Then the next thing will be not to go out. For once accept invitations, and it is impossible to know where to draw the line. Now, who used to be more exclusive than Mrs. Charlton? And yet whom did I meet there the other day save Mrs. Kent, that adventuress, who set the new opera-singer going.

"Mrs. Kent, an adventuress!" repeated Alex, sharply. "Really, Elinor, I think you might choose your words with finer feeling and better taste."

"I don't know her at all," said Elinor; "that is, I did not know her until I had actually to sit at the same table with her. I have no feelings concerning her; and as to my taste, it is my own, and to be con-

sidered with the rest of my possessions. As to Mrs. Kent's being an adventuress,—that is not a matter of taste or feeling, but of fact.”

“I deny it,” said Alex, almost fiercely. “I have the greatest respect for that lady. Are you not aware that my uncle has entertained a close friendship for her for years?”

“Many gentlemen are a little infatuated about her, I believe,” said Elinor, perfectly calm and cool, and scanning the visitor with an unwavering glance.

“I do hope, Alex,” said Mrs. Devereux, uneasily, “that you are not carried away—that you will do nothing foolish. She—I mean Mrs. Kent—behaved very prettily when she gave the musicale. And it was really all very nice. Strange to say, I knew everybody in the room except Mrs. Kent and her opera-singer. It was the first time for a long while that I had been really among my own friends, except at my own house. And I enjoyed it—for Mrs. Kent quite took my fancy, and I did not know then—”

“Mamma,” said Elinor, “Mrs. Kent is a particular friend of Dr. Walton’s.”

“Oh, I hope not, I hope not,” said Mrs. Devereux. “These beautiful young women all alone in the world without a protector get themselves sadly talked about.”

“Oh, mamma, pray do not,” said Elinor, languidly, “if she is a friend of Dr. Walton’s.”

“But are you her friend, Alex?” inquired Mrs. Devereux, her pretty, finely-cut features taking on

an unusual look of decision. "For if so, you should not make her talked about on your account."

"On my account?" repeated Alex, flushing. He was glad of something definite; the tissue of vague defamation was so broad and so unsubstantial that it had not seemed worth his while to exert himself to tear such cobwebs to pieces. "What do they say about Mrs. Kent and me?" he now asked.

"That the day of the musicale you were hiding in the hall when we all took leave, — that you postponed your visit to her until we were all safely out of the way."

"Mamma," said Elinor, "I wonder how you —"

"It is a perfectly true statement," said Alex. "You know my dislike for musical parties and all that sort of thing. I was glad to avoid the crowd. I did want to see Mrs. Kent, so I spent an hour with her when her parlors were empty. Perhaps you also heard that I was in a box at the theatre with her all the evening afterwards."

Mrs. Devereux's jaw had fallen. She looked utterly stricken. "Alone?" she gasped.

"Well, no," said Alex, with an air of regret; "Miss Longstaffe and Roger Charlton were there as well."

"I dare say you have seen her many times since," said Elinor, blandly; "I grant that she is an attractive woman."

"I have been so closely engaged in Philadelphia that I have had less opportunity than I wished for to cultivate her acquaintance. Still, I have seen her more than once."

"And now you have come back to New York for good, you can enjoy the requisite leisure and opportunity for seeing her every day."

"I flatter myself with that hope," said Alex, and his eyes met Elinor's with defiance and resolution. The look she gave him in return was not tender.

Mrs. Devereux rallied all her powers to effect an instant change of subject. It was fairly indecorous that Elinor should be discussing the relations of a young man with a married woman. She blamed herself for broaching the topic at all; she realized with dejection that nowadays, when the world was slipping away from her, she could no longer sketch out her programme and have it filled up according to her wishes. Hitherto she had almost invariably found that Alex Walton answered her curb, but now he was evidently in some incalculable state of mind, and as wrong-headed as any young man alive.

"Here comes papa," she exclaimed presently, with an air of relief, and jumped up to kiss a purple-faced, white-haired old gentlemen, who came in in riding costume. "How cold you are, dear! Your nose looks quite frostbitten. Here is Dr. Walton, just back from Philadelphia."

"How do, Alex?" said Mr. Devereux. "Glad to see you, I'm sure. I was sorry to hear your uncle was not well."

Alex had risen to shake the extended hand.

"I had heard nothing about it. Is he ill?"

"I met Robbins, who told me he had a bad cold. He had been telegraphing for you; hoped you would be there by to-morrow."

"He shouldn't get colds; at his age it is dangerous. I must go and look after him at once. In any case, I expected to stay all night with him."

Mr. Devereux sat down by the fire and stretched out his legs. He was glad to see Alex, and wished he had not been so precipitate in blurting out bad news.

"Oh, we old fellows can stand a good deal," said he. "Robbins said it was merely a cold. Still, I confess, your uncle has not appeared to me over-hearty of late. Never comes here. But that's the way of the world. Few people darken our doors nowadays. There was a time when we needed a dozen men in our stable-yard to take the visitors' horses as they rode up. Now, because they can't get over here without some infernal electrical machine, we are considered quite out of their orbit. You yourself have not been near us for months. You used to like to come, Alex. There's your room upstairs, close by poor John's, and the old lady here dusts 'em both every Saturday morning, and puts fresh flowers in 'em. The fashions of this world don't change for us; we don't improve, — we don't put any patent high-pressure, self-revolving, cylindrical machines in the place of our hearts. We don't find so much variety in our lives that all the old thoughts, and the old loves, and the old griefs, must be crowded out and have no chance to come up and look us in the face. We just live on here day after day and week after week, lonely and sore over our rubs and our losses, longing for the old familiar faces and the old voices

in greeting. You knew my boy, Alex, and you'll always seem to me almost a son of my own. Don't follow the way of the world and forget us."

The old man sat muttering this complaint and rubbing his benumbed legs with his thawing hands, looking over his shoulder at Alex with a sad but kindly glance.

"Come again," he said, in a tone of authority.

"I will," said Alex. "You and Mrs. Devereux are to me what no one else has been. I don't forget, and never shall."

Yet he got himself out of the house as quickly as he could, feeling a strong resentment which made it irksome for him to be under the same roof with Elinor. He strode down the avenue; but did not take the road to his uncle's, but towards the station. His concern for Mr. Bell was momentarily swallowed up in a stronger and more personal feeling. He was going back to town to see Margaret as quickly as he could. He was a man not easily offended, but who, when once offended, could be very angry. He had clearly understood that Elinor had not uttered a word without a definite intention. Nobody could be freer from spontaneous impulses than she. He had never known her to say or do a thing under an excess of sudden emotion.

"And I might finally have drifted into marriage with that girl," he said to himself, "and been cramped by her petty standards, her false and foolish ideals, all my life."

His feelings rushed like a flood towards the idea

of Margaret. Elinor had at least done him one service: she had freed him from all obligation towards her, and he would enjoy the first bloom of his liberty in throwing himself at the feet of the woman he loved. He caught a train, and was in town again before the short afternoon was over. The low clouds were thickening into mist, and in the west one faint and mournful gleam of yellow gave added melancholy to the twilight. The street lamps blazed forth just as he rang at the door of the house and asked for Mrs. Kent. She was at home, the servant said, but very much engaged and could see no one.

"Ask if she will not let me in," said Dr. Walton, taking a card from his pocket. "I will wait here. I wish particularly to see her."

The servant shut the door in his face; and the time seemed long before she returned and said that Mrs. Kent begged the gentleman to come up. This momentary suspense had added to Dr. Walton's impatience. His eyes burned, and the color came and went in his face as he sprang up the stairs and entered the parlor where Margaret was. It was brightly lighted, the curtains were drawn, and before the fire was a table covered with scattered sheets of manuscript, the ink still undried on some of them. Margaret was in a loose gown of white, covered with lace and ribbons, her hair disordered, her fingers ink-stained, her face flushed, and her eyes dilated.

As Dr. Walton entered she came forward.

"Oh! is he worse?" she said, in a trembling voice. "Don't tell me he is worse."

Alex closed the door and stood looking at her.

"Do you mean my uncle?" he asked, as if bewildered.

"Why, yes, of course, your uncle. Did you not know that he was ill — quite ill? Mrs. Nash sent for me to come two hours ago. I could not go. I felt so remorseful, but I could not. I had to finish some writing and have it ready for the printer to-morrow. I promised to go out by seven to-morrow if they would send again. I have been working desperately to get this finished. It was cold in my room, and I brought my table out here and denied myself to callers. Miss Longstaffe has taken Gladys to a child's party, and I was all alone. But when I heard that you were here, I felt so certain you had come to bring some dreadful tidings, I thought of nothing except seeing you and hearing what it was. Do forgive this dreadful disorder and my untidiness."

They were standing quite near each other; she was looking up at him wholly intent upon her explanations, her face flushed, her eyes brilliant, and the keen, vibrating consciousness which had possessed her while she was at her work making her whole mien transcend what he had ever seen in her before. At first, when he did not answer, she was still too highly poised above mere personal emotion to have any self-consciousness; but when he continued to gaze back at her as if rapt in delight simply at taking in her beauty, her own eyes dropped, and a child-like, troubled look came over her face. Just to end the silence she stammered out,

"It was something I had to finish — the 'copy' I mean; — it had been paid for. I had spent the money, and so, when they sent word they must have it in order that the printers could go to work on it early to-morrow, there was no alternative. I had to do it or die in the attempt."

There was something so naïve, babylike, and yet to him so pathetic, in this confession, that it moved him to a sort of tender laughter.

"Throw your pen in the fire," said he. "You shall never write any more. I'm going to take care of you henceforth."

He had come nearer to her. His words were half playful, half imperious. He was laughing; yet something in his face inspired her with a sort of dread.

"What have you got to tell the world?" said he.

"I see," she exclaimed, trying to parry something which she felt coming towards her, "you do not know what a brilliant authoress I am. I have a great destiny."

"I will tell you what your destiny is," said he. "Your destiny is to belong to me." He put a hand on either of her cheeks, and looked down at her with a powerful and penetrating gaze. "Dearest," said he in the softest tone, "don't you feel it to be so? Don't you wish it to be so?"

She was hardly conscious. Her head was whirling. She was trembling like a leaf. Her whole face quivered, and tears rushed into her eyes.

"I love you," he whispered. "Oh, I love you—

my God, how I love you! Do say you care for me a little."

He was looking in her face for some sign of surrender.

"Oh, why are you silent?" he cried. "Is there anybody else you love?"

"Oh, no, no, no — none," said Margaret, in a voice of terrible woe. What could she say? What could she do? If it were *right* — if there were no wrong in admitting to him that she cared for him — if she could accept his imperious will as her law! He understood it all; of course he understood it all — that she had to be made free first. His uncle's suggestion must have been instigated by him. If he would say just one word to convince her that he knew all the dangers and humiliations of her position.

"You think that I ought to have waited," he said now; "that I am too precipitate. Is that it?"

She nodded; her eyes fell; she almost shuddered.

"I will wait — I will do anything you say," he went on; "only tell me first — I must know that you love me. I'm a man dying of thirst — but that will be some sort of comfort — say that you love me."

Their glances met; the moment was a solemn one. She uttered no word, but her eyes grew fuller and fuller of a meaning which made his heart brim over. He longed to clasp her in his arms, but restrained himself. Something in her whole look seemed to invoke his patience, his clemency — to bid him to wait. That wonderful, excited, beautiful face, with its frightened splendid eyes, its pure and

airy brow, made him worship almost more than it tempted him. He still held it between his large, gentle hands.

"Oh, child, child, child," said he, now sighing, and releasing his hold upon her. She half smiled, dropping her eyes shyly, and he caught her back to him, drew her to his breast, and pressed his lips upon her hair.

She started from him at once, and he did not detain her.

"Forgive me," said he. "Not but that I consider I have been very generous." He knew through every fibre of his being that she loved him, and hence could afford to be in a royal mood. "We will speak of all this a little later; *a little later*," he repeated with a half-laugh. "I must have some conscience about Uncle Bert," he went on; "I suppose I had better go at once."

"Decidedly," said Margaret. "There is a train at 6:04. You must go this instant."

"How imperious she is!" exclaimed Alex. "Ah, let me stay five minutes. I have only just come."

"You should not have come at all," declared Margaret. "Your uncle is very ill."

"No, he has only a cold. Mrs. Nash and Robbins are taking good care of him — I am certain of that. And this hour can never come again." He kept his eyes fixed on her, smiling, and yet fully conscious of the absurdity of his mood. There was something novel and strangely sweet in the interview for him. She was radiant with her happiness; let her try to

disguise it as she might, he said to himself, she loved him — although her feelings were touched by the deep awe and solemnity with which a woman must encounter supreme human passion. And how beautiful she was! How unutterably pretty and naïve were all her little ways. She moved across the room, and he saw something in her motion which made it evident to him that the most delicious experience life could offer was to stay there and watch her forever. What was that she was doing now? A furtive little movement. Ah, she had found a smudge of ink upon her little white finger, and was rubbing it away with her handkerchief. He strode across the room to her side, took the little hand and began kissing it.

“Good night,” said she, withdrawing from him with a princess-like air. “Good night.”

“Good night,” said Alex. “I consider that you treat me abominably. I go, but I shall return. I’ll come in the morning and take you out to Uncle Bert’s.”

She looked at him with an anxious, almost terrified expression.

His arm stole about her.

“Darling,” said he, softly, “you might as well trust me. I assure you, you may do so. I realize all your terror at my impatience. All this is new to you. I have thought it out, night and day. I have thought of little else. My love, my life, my dear wife that is to be, — say that you trust me.”

She looked up at him, her face quivering with doubt and pain. “Oh, I do trust you,” she said.

"But you must be wise for me. I am easily led by anyone I love, and—and—and—it does seem to me that until all this coming trouble is over, we ought to be just friends and no more."

"How can we be just friends and no more?" said he. But her face sobered him. She was thinking with alarm about his uncle, he told himself, while with him passion had usurped the place of kindness and natural feeling.

"It shall be as you wish," he said, with a return of his usual decision. "On the whole, I will not come for you to-morrow. I will send the carriage after breakfast. That will perhaps be best."

"Yes, much the best. Now, if you hurry very much you can catch that train. Good-bye."

He did not loiter this time.

"Good-bye," said he. "Friends, you say. No more?"

"Friends. No more."

He threw a laughing glance round the room.

"Every unworthy thing
Lives here in heaven and may look on her ;
But Romeo may not."

He lifted a tress of her bright hair, kissed it, and then left her without a backward glance.

CHAPTER XV.

FEVERISH DREAMS.

It was past seven o'clock when Dr. Walton reached his uncle's. Robbins was watching, and at the sound of footsteps flung the door wide open.

"I thought, sir, you were never coming," said he.

"How is my uncle?"

"His mind wanders; he hasn't been himself since night before last."

"Tell me all about it."

"He wrote a letter about twelve o'clock. He was a-writing it when I went to bed. He sent me off; he said he should be glad to have the house quiet. I wasn't quite easy in my mind, but I went to sleep; and I was woke up by the sound of the door. He was unbolting it. I got up and listened, and the rush of cold air made me think the door was open, and I came down. It was open, and I couldn't find the master anywhere. He had gone out to post the letter himself."

"How do you know?"

"I waited, a-wondering and fearing. Presently he came up the walk, no hat on, no muffler, and no great coat. I spoke to him, but he went straight past me and sat down before the fire in the study,

without a word. Finally, I heard him a-muttering to himself, and I went nearer. 'A tale that is told,' that was it; he kep' a-saying of that over and over all night."

"Did he go to bed?"

"We got him to bed, Mrs. Nash and I. We put hot water to his feet an' poured brandy down his throat. He didn't much mind anything we did, just bore it and looked at us,—Mrs. Nash said, grave and sweet as a far-off angel. He slep' yesterday from seven in the morning till four in the afternoon, and waked up very hoarse, and said there was a weight on his head. We had Dr. Morris out, who gave him some powders, but at noon to-day his mind began to wander and I telegraphed to you."

Alex waited to hear no more, but went to his uncle's room at once. He felt stricken with dread lest some precious time had been lost.

The old man was lying with his face turned towards the fire. "Is that you, Alex?" he asked, petulantly. "I did not know that you had come. Who sent for you?"

"Oh, I came back from Philadelphia to-day," said Dr. Walton, "and I thought I would dine and spend the night with you. I'm sorry you're unwell."

"Oh, I'm well," said Mr. Bell; "I was never better in my life."

He withdrew his hand when his nephew tried to lay his fingers on his wrist. It was evident that he was under the influence of fever, although Alex was not certain whether his mind was clear or not.

"There's life in me yet," said the sick man. "I may be old; but are not graybeards to have a chance? You may argue with me all day and all night, but I will maintain my right to marry her."

"I quite agree with you," said Alex, soothingly. "You have my full sympathy. Don't mistrust me."

Mr. Bell raised his eyes, and tried to read the other's face; but the effort was too much.

"I don't feel quite well," said he. "It is not much, but it presses upon me —"

"Where?"

"Here and here," said the sick man, indicating his left side and his forehead.

Alex passed his hand over the forehead and down the breast. "You'll be all right to-morrow, Uncle Bert," said he, "if you will take some nourishment and then go to sleep. Try to follow my directions, will you not?"

"Oh, anything, anything," said the old man, wearily.

He took the broth his housekeeper brought, and, after a time, fell into a troubled sleep, muttering incoherently and moaning. Alex resolved not to leave him that night, and threw himself upon a lounge before the fire, counting the respirations and noting every symptom of distress. It was evident that the old man was sharply ill, but there need not, the doctor thought, be any occasion for more than ordinary anxiety. Margaret had been apprehensive of the worst; it showed that she had a warm heart. What was there most attractive in woman which she had

not? he asked himself, with a deep stirring of tenderness. His thoughts had already wandered from his uncle, and buzzed like bees gathering sweetness about the idea of Margaret. How she had stood startled, expectant, her beautiful eyes dilated, when he went in! She had not a thought of a coming lover—not one. She dreaded bad news, and had come forth to meet it with a look of woe on her white face. She had forgotten the untidiness of the room; there was a lovely disorder in her whole array. . . .

“Such sweet neglect more taketh me,”

said Alex to himself. A coil of her golden hair had perpetually tumbled on her shoulder, and her little round hand had constantly twisted it, put it back, and groped for a pin to secure it. He remembered how her color came and went; how her lips quivered, pouted, drooped down at the corners, and then melted into a smile. He recalled the expression of her eyes, raised at last full of love and happiness to meet his. He thought of the kiss he had pressed upon her hair. . . . He started up and paced up and down the room. His head was dizzy, his heart beat powerfully. “This is absurd,” he said, almost audibly. “I am making an utter fool of myself.” But he smiled nevertheless. He knew that he was happy, and the once coveted wisdom might take care of itself. He suddenly remembered that he was watching with his uncle, who was very ill. He sat down by the bedside and again counted the respirations. The breathing

was more regular and less constrained. The old man was likely to be almost as well as usual when Margaret came, on the morrow. They were to meet "just as friends and no more," she had said. "Friends?" Was it not a delicious little prudery on her part — "friends?" Oh, yes; as friends — just friends and no more. He could hear the intonation of her delicious voice, and see her pleading, uplifted face, the wide eyes a little pensive. Certainly as "friends;" but as to being just friends and no more, some things are so difficult — so difficult as to be put out of the question as impossible. No; what was the use of taking anything except the question of their mutual love into consideration? Let the past go, and let the present and the future have their course. He was the more ready to be a little impetuous because he had hitherto been calm and collected.

"I shall be a married man before many months," he said to himself, with a sort of boyish glee.

Mr. Bell turned sharply on his pillow and uttered an exclamation. "What is it, Uncle Bert?" asked Alex.

"Who is it? Not Alex — I don't want Alex," said the old man, fretfully. "Keep him away."

"Yes, we'll keep him away. Let him stay in Philadelphia."

"Yes, in Philadelphia — I don't want him — he's a cold, rational fellow. I hate his sober judgment."

"So do I," said Alex.

"It's the last flare of the old torch before it goes out forever," the sick man went on excitedly.

"But if anybody is to marry her why shouldn't it be I?"

"Yes, yes," said Alex, soothingly.

"Tell her—tell her—that I can give her and Gladys a home—that I can shield her from all the troubles of the world,—that—that—I'm an old man—"

Alex listened, perplexed and startled.

"Do you mean I am to tell Mrs. Kent this?" he asked, gently.

"Yes,—I'll not give her up to a young fellow—I'm sick of the emptiness of life without her."

Alex made every effort to calm him.

"Don't excite yourself," said he. "Everything shall be just as you wish. Mrs. Nash wants you to take a little nourishment."

The housekeeper had entered at the sound of voices, and turned up the light a little. Mr. Bell opened his eyes wide and looked about the room.

"I was dreaming," said he. "I seemed to be somewhere else."

"You are here in your own room, Uncle Bert. You are feeling better, are you not? Take this and sleep again."

Mr. Bell looked from one to the other and accepted the liquid his nephew offered him, with no disposition to say a word. After it was swallowed he closed his eyes, and for a time Alex believed that he was again going to sleep. The room was utterly quiet save for his breathing and the soft roaring of the fire. "Alex," he called after a time.

Alex bent over him.

"Am I likely to die?"

"No, — honestly, I see no reason why you should not come out of this. The fever has gone."

"But I am in danger still?"

"Perhaps so, unless you resolve to be very quiet — to make no effort."

"I want to see Mrs. Kent before I die."

"She will be here to-morrow."

"You understand what she is to me, Alex."

"I understand."

"You won't be hurt that I have left her half of my personal property. You will not make trouble."

"No. Trust me for that, Uncle Bert. But no more words now."

"I would have married her if —" A paroxysm of coughing came on, and he was obliged to break off.

"Not another word," said Alex, imperatively.

Silence once more took possession of the room. Alex sat the rest of the night pondering whether his uncle had meant, "I would have married her if I had lived," or "I would have married her if I could."

CHAPTER XVI.

MARGARET'S VIGIL.

WHEN Mr. Bell's letter reached Margaret, two days before the date of the last chapter, it had seemed to put an end to her doubts and uncertainties. If Mr. Bell insisted on such a course of action, all obstacles must be easy to overcome, and the most unmanageable circumstances would grow pliant. Margaret had given up many of her old phrases and formulas after she had read the letter her aunt brought her concerning Robert Kent's life in South America. She had not made up her mind definitely as to what she believed in and clung to. What she experienced was a singular disinclination to everything familiar; a sense of lassitude and *ennui*. Hitherto she had something to assert as bravely as she might: a duty to fill up the void of spontaneous desires and beliefs; a sort of fiction of her own happiness and success to impose upon others. Now that it was necessary to confess that she had made a dismal failure of her married life, she was timid and knew not how to meet the emergency. To break from her old moorings was a trying experience. Poor refuge although her haven was, she had floated there in comparative safety. To set out on a fresh voyage into unknown seas, the lights all changing

and the compasses all veering, and nothing to steer by save her own individual wish and will, would have been an impossible enterprise. Mr. Bell's letter came at a moment when she was sick of the emptiness of dreams and longed for any reality. If this thing were to come to pass, it was imposed upon her as a necessity by those who were older and wiser. She had been contented enough, — she had not sought for happiness, so she said, within herself, with a certain indignation. If her acceptance of her destiny had been a virtue, she had not proclaimed it as a virtue; if it had been a fault, it was a fault she had not known how to avoid. She had simply acquiesced when fate told her she must work or starve; and she had worked with a good will. She had never yielded to self-pity. She had had no Spartan heroism, but had put a certain joy into whatever she did, dismissed apprehensions, and never thought twice complainingly about an unpleasant matter, nor about the good things of life out of her reach.

But if she were to be urged to take them!

"Would it not be wicked for me to turn away from a chance of happiness?" she asked Miss Longstaffe. "I should love to be happy. I should dearly love to be happy."

Miss Longstaffe only shook her head grimly. Her taciturnity was not easily moved in these days. She too felt frightened and a little bewildered by the turn of events. She could not help feeling that her opinions were a little too much of the cut-and-dried order, and did not fit themselves to all cases.

The news of Mr. Bell's illness came before Margaret had made the least acknowledgment of his letter. She was hard at work, and had postponed even thinking until the end of her task. Dr. Walton had taken her unguardedly; she was not ready to see him; she was not ready to hear his declaration of love. She was hampered by the idea of her unfinished work, and notions of right and wrong were oddly jumbled up in her mind. Still, he had moved her; a thousand reasons were in her mind why she wished he would not speak, why he should go away; but there were a thousand reasons in her heart why she could only listen,—certainly with awe, with dread, but with delight as well. When he was really gone, she drew a breath of relief—that is, she said to herself it was relief. She had her work to finish and to put in the box for the night postman to take up. Clearly, with real work-a-day matters like these troubling one, pressing upon one's heart and conscience, one could not be carried away by enchantments. She sat down and began anew to write. Nothing had ever been so easy. Her meaning was clear before her, dazzling flashes opened into new vistas of thought and fancy. She finished her story, and under the inspiration of fresh feeling went back and rewrote certain scenes which had dissatisfied her. She did not observe the flight of time, and it was past nine o'clock before she finally threw down her pen and leaned back in her chair. Somebody was coming up the stairs; in another moment Miss Longstaffe and Gladys were in the room.

"What! home already!" cried Margaret. "I had no idea it was so late. This must be put into the box at once. Will you do it, Sarah? You have your things on." She rummaged for a large envelope, directed it, and put on a row of stamps.

"What! all that postage?" said Gladys. "Fifteen and ten and three and two — why, mamma, that is a great deal."

"Oh, well, no matter," said Margaret. "No matter. Why, Sarah, what makes you look at me like that?"

"A cat may look at a king," said Miss Longstaffe.

"And you look like a queen, mamma," cried Gladys. "Oh, how beautiful you are! and you smile — you smile like —"

"I supposed that you would have gone out to Mr. Bell's before this," said Miss Longstaffe.

"No," answered Margaret, the bright scarlet spot on each cheek suddenly becoming merged in a rosy flush that spread over her whole face; "Dr. Walton was here."

"Yes; I heard at the door that he had been here. What did he say about his uncle?"

"He had not seen him. Had heard it was a cold."

• "Hem!" said Miss Longstaffe, "I will post your manuscript."

Margaret gave it to her, but did not meet her eyes. "It is so good of you, dear Sarah," she said, in a voice like a caress.

"I am not good at all; I'm savage," exclaimed

Miss Longstaffe, even banging the door slightly as she went out.

"You see, mamma," said Gladys, "Cousin Sarah is cross because it is dark and wet and cold. The rain is like little needles."

Margaret did not listen; she was walking up and down the room, her hands clasped above her head. She was smiling like a happy child.

"You smile all the time, mamma," said Gladys. "Mr. Bell must be a great deal better for you to be so glad as that."

Margaret shuddered.

"I'm horribly selfish," she said. "I didn't ever think to ask about your party. Did you have a happy time?"

"Oh, yes," said Gladys; "there was not a great deal to do, but there was more than we wanted to eat, and we liked that."

"Yes; that is a consideration," said Margaret, laughing. "It seems to me I myself should like something to eat; I had quite forgotten about it."

Gladys was enchanted at the idea of providing for her mother; and when Miss Longstaffe came back from her walk to the lamp-post, she found the two busy over a pot of chocolate. She sat down for a while and watched and listened to mother and child. She felt apart from both, as if in a separate world. She had had the penalty of loneliness and misapprehension to pay all her life, from inner causes, not from outward influences; and now she sat there dull, and heavy, and wretched, angry with Margaret for

her beauty and her happiness. She felt that she would rather have seen her in tears.

Margaret was glad to hear Miss Longstaffe's stiff, reluctant good night. She was eager to be alone, and grew impatient of Gladys' wakefulness. But Gladys for many a day now had not found her mother so easy of access; and clung to her, longing to tell the story of the letter, which had never yet been disclosed. Twice when she had declared she wanted to say something about her papa, Margaret had forbade her to speak of him. Then, at other times, the child had forgotten; the recollection of what she had written was dim nowadays, and only came when she was excited.

"Why do you tremble? Are you cold?" her mother asked, feeling the tremors which ran through the little figure she held close in her arms.

"I am not cold," said Gladys, "I am afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

Gladys did not answer for a moment; then said, "Do you feel my heart beat, mamma?"

"No, dear."

"It does beat very much. Oh, it is so long that I have wanted to say something about dear papa! May I say it now?"

"No, not to-night," said Margaret, imperiously. "You must not say another word about anything. I shall put you in bed at once."

But after the child's head was on the pillow, Margaret heard a little sound.

"Gladys, are you crying?" she asked.

"Only just one little sob, mamma, — I won't cry any more."

"Don't cry. Why should you cry? Ah me, if ever woman had bitter things to cry about, it has been I; and have I cried?"

"No, dear, beautiful, good mamma," quivered Gladys.

Margaret bent and kissed her passionately. The little girl's eyelids fluttered; she smiled, half opened her lips as if to speak, then sighed, pressed the hand she held, and turned her cheek closer to the pillow. In an instant more she was asleep.

Margaret could wander around the empty rooms now, secure from scrutiny or interruption. Her spirits had fallen a little; they were not so high nor so daring as they had been while she was finishing her story. Her thoughts perpetually reverted to her little girl's allusion to her father. She uneasily wished she had let her have her say. That leaf in her life was to be turned down forever, — but after all she could not so utterly separate the new from the old that Gladys would not continue to be Robert Kent's child. Foolish trick of the blood as it might be, a child must hanker after its father. Yes, she wished she had let Gladys speak out. That might have laid the spectre, for it seemed as if this allusion had evoked her husband's shadowy presence; his voice sounded in her ears; she heard his laugh. . . . The next three or four hours passed slowly. Margaret sat before the fire leaning forward, her hands clasping her knees, her head at times bent down to

them. Memories pressed upon her, and she went over them one by one. She tried to analyze her feelings towards her husband in those early days when she still supposed she was happy; while she was bearing with him, trying to manage him, easily tolerating his pleasant vices, his weakness and unthrift, without any especial idea that these were the enemies which were to maim and spoil both their lives. After Gladys came, maternal solicitude deepened and sharpened her intelligence. In fact, Margaret now saw that until she was a mother she had had neither passions nor real emotions, — merely a precocious intellect and a crude will. It was then that she first measured her husband, and found him lacking in dignity and strength, — callous to every consideration save physical pain and discomfort. Still, they had never quarrelled. It was natural for Margaret when denied one outlet of feeling to seek another, and it was just at this time that she began to write. When their reverses came, after Robert's speculations had turned out badly, she seemed to have been only half awake to the fact that her inheritance from her father was all flung away. It was difficult for her now to look back and say what had been real and what fictitious in her experience; to decide how much she had actually suffered in the loss of the brightness, tenderness, security, which make other women happy in their married life.

"Perhaps," she said aloud, after pondering the anomalies of her existence, "perhaps the matter is that I have no heart."

As she said it she smiled and blushed. She remembered something re-assuring, something widely different from any former experience. The recollection of Dr. Walton's look sent warm currents through her veins. "He loves me," she said to herself. "Robert never loved me — Robert could not love anyone. *He* loves me." She did not say to herself that she loved Alex in return. What she did feel was that if this wonderful dream were to come true, she should be so happy that nothing in the wide world could exceed her in happiness. She had done with poor material so long, she had learned to accept makeshifts so patiently, that it awed her to think of having the best things. To love a man of noble fibre, into whose eyes she could not look without a glad uplifting of soul into worship, — that was beyond her dreams. "Can it be?" she said over and over, and pressed her hands against her temples, for the veins there throbbed as if bursting. Her cheeks and lips were hot; but icy shivers ran through her, and her hands turned cold. Before that happiness could come, there was a dark sea of doubt and danger to cross, and the presentiment suddenly assailed her mind that the difficulties would be found insurmountable. Dark, strange apprehensions swept across her like a heavy mist. A proud, exclusive man like Dr. Walton must shrink from the coarse, commonplace, dreary details which must be taken up, examined, compared and discussed before she could be freed from her bondage. She shuddered and hid her face.

"Oh, this is a dream — a wild, fantastic dream!" she said to herself. "Such a thing could never be. I ought not to allow it. He may have misunderstood. At any rate, he cannot have counted the cost of it all."

She started up as if stung. She could remember how only a few short weeks ago she had repelled every suggestion from Miss Fothergill regarding a divorce. She had been ready then with a thousand arguments against it. She had felt that it would be an irrevocable wrong committed, which to gain even happiness would be a sacrilege, a cruel selfishness, that must strike at the very roots of all that she had hitherto trusted and believed in.

What was this powerful subduing influence which had roused her heart and benumbed her conscience? . . . The passionate stirring in her nature had gone deep; nevertheless, in all the tumults of her mind it alarmed and shocked her to think of renouncing anything which had once been sacred and precious to her. Still, were there not crises in every life when habit and custom are less precious and sacred than change and revolution — when the best and only wisdom is to renounce the past with its mistakes, and joyfully accept a new duty and happiness? This experience had not come by her intention or choice. The very fact that this was a new influence which governed her and sent all the currents of her intellect and will into a different course was an answer to any cavil against her logic or consistency. There was but one person who could have instantly transformed

the whole aspect of her world for her; contact with whom discovered to her demands of her heart the existence of which she had not hitherto known anything about. The principles by which she would govern her actions were not taught by her own personal wishes; she would have mistrusted her individual convictions. She would not herself have dared to say that since her marriage bond was an encumbrance it must be broken, and all her past shattered into fragments. It was another and a stronger voice which declared it. "God is thy law; thou mine," she quoted over and over, finding it answer her needs, now that everything in her existence had shifted so bewilderingly that she was unable to formulate an axiom for herself. That phrase, which she had always thought pretty, but hardly the product of her own experience of life, now helped her. In fact, she was worn out, and her brain refused to work any longer. She still sat before the fire, clasping her knees, and bending her head forward upon them. In this attitude she slept a little, then stirred suddenly, becoming aware that the faint wintry twilight was in the room; also that some person had entered.

"Why, Sarah, are you up already?" she gasped, for it was Miss Longstaffe.

"Oh, my poor child, you have not been to bed," said the older woman.

It was already after seven o'clock. One lamp had burned itself out, the other was near its final flicker; the grate showed few live coals. Nothing could be more hopeless and dreary than the aspect of the

room to the older woman. She stood looking down at Margaret, with a grave, anxious face.

"No, I did not go to bed," said Margaret. She sprang up, went to the window, threw back the curtains and raised the shade. It was a dull, gray morning; the mists of the night before had congealed on the pavements; everything was covered with ice. "Oh, what a dreadful day," she said, with a shiver. She turned back, and met Miss Longstaffe's eyes. "Don't look like that, Sarah," she said, coaxingly. "Be good to me to-day."

"But why did you not go to bed?"

Margaret flung her arms round the elder woman's neck. "Oh, I was so happy and so miserable," she exclaimed, with a sort of sob.

"Are you doing right?"

"I am doing nothing. Everything is being done for me. After rowing all alone upstream all my life, it is so pleasant at last to drop the oars and drift with the current, or at least be guided by better pilots than such as I."

Miss Longstaffe shook her head. Optimism did not come easily to her. She had read Mr. Bell's letter and had not expressed dissent from his views. She, like Margaret, had taken for granted that he alluded to his nephew as the man who loved her and was to marry her. But it all perplexed and annoyed her. She certainly intended to offer no encouragement to anybody, and she would at the same time refrain from doing more in the way of discouragement than to cast a general damper over any prema-

ture ecstasies. Margaret was still the wife of Robert Kent, and Miss Longstaffe now registered an inward vow that, until that legal tie was dissolved, she would not allow her to go out of her sight. She petted the pretty head, which lay upon her shoulder for a moment, then told Margaret she had better go and bathe and dress for breakfast. She herself set about the arrangement of the room; put fresh coals on the fire, laid the table and made the coffee, and took in the fresh rolls from the baker. When, an hour later, Margaret re-emerged with Gladys, she was ready to reject as a fiction of her own imagining the recollection of her vigil, her agony and her joy. Beside her plate was a letter, the sight of which brought a vivid color to her face. Miss Longstaffe looked at her as she broke the seal and read it.

"You may see it, Sarah," Margaret said a minute later, and Miss Longstaffe was glad enough to avail herself of the privilege. It was dated the previous evening at ten o'clock, and ran thus:—

I found my uncle worse than I had expected, but I count on a decided improvement after midnight. I want you to come without fail to-morrow. In any case, whether better or worse, he will ask for you incessantly. I shall send the carriage at nine. Do not bring Gladys, although there is nothing contagious. I think she is better off at home in this bad weather. Trust me. I have been thinking of what you said, and other causes have made me feel that just at this present moment I must not call you mine except to myself and one other person. But, all the same, that does not hinder me from being yours till death.

ALEX.

Margaret looked at Miss Longstaffe ; her face was full of a soft brilliance.

"Well," she said, "what do you think of it, Sarah?"

"I hope Mr. Bell is better to-day," was Miss Longstaffe's reply.

"Oh, I'm certain he is better," said Margaret, with decision.

"Shall you go when the carriage comes?"

"Yes ; of course I must go."

She could not have thought just then of one reason in the world why she should not go. A hundred reasons in her heart pleaded, urged, made her impatient to go. She ate her breakfast ; then mechanically went about certain little tasks, which she hurried through. By nine o'clock she was in her own room. She looked at her face in the glass.

"Why, I have grown pretty. I was never so pretty as this before," she thought to herself, and she was glad. She had not much vanity about her face ; but she liked to be becomingly dressed, and she wondered what she ought to put on. She must be fresh and not too fine. She chose a black dress of soft wool, with bands of fur round throat and wrists, then took it off with a sort of shiver because it reminded her of a mourning garment. Next she drew out a gown of dull dark red. That might have done, one would have thought ; but on examination it was a trifle worn at the elbows. She tried a gray gown which fitted like the skin,—but it was chilly-looking, and made her pallid and lifeless. The dark green

was the thing; it set off her hair, showed the delicate coloring of her face, without any loss of brilliancy. She was hesitating a moment on the question of a ruff or a collar for her neck, when somebody tapped at the door.

"The carriage is here," said Miss Longstaffe.

"Oh, come in, Sarah. Is it so late? I am just ready. Will you find me my furred cloak? Oh, you are going out," said Margaret, seeing that Miss Longstaffe was dressed in a thick black mantle and mittens, and had a gray shawl on her arm besides.

"Of course; I am going with you," Miss Longstaffe replied, primly. "You would hardly have gone out there by yourself."

Margaret gazed at her a moment in astonishment, then burst into a peal of laughter.

"Oh, you good Sarah," she said, softly; "you good, faithful, noble Sarah!"

"I confess, I don't see anything noble in my course. It's excessively inconvenient, for I have all sorts of work to do. And it will be inexpressibly tedious; but, all the same, I am going with you, Margaret. I'm not reckless of proprieties."

"Neither am I," said Margaret, more soberly. "This is just as it should be. Come, dear; I am ready."

CHAPTER XVII.

AN IDLE, HAPPY DAY.

DR. WALTON was standing on the steps when the carriage drew up. It had begun to snow half an hour before, and, by this time, there was a driving storm and the ground was white. He darted forward the moment the horses stopped, opened the door and leaned inside, seizing the nearest hand which lay extended on the fur robe. It was encased in a woollen mitten, but Dr. Alex grasped it mitten and all, and would perhaps have gone to some further length, had not a voice grim and forbidding issued from the figure, saying,

"How do you do, Dr. Walton?" in tones which would have frozen the raptures of a Romeo.

He uttered an exclamation. "Oh, I beg pardon."

"This is Miss Longstaffe," said Margaret, her flower-like face now shining in the half-darkness of the carriage against the background of mink and sable. "How is your uncle to-day?"

"Better — decidedly better," said Alex. "This is very good of you, Miss Longstaffe. Let me assist you to alight. Mrs. Kent, please wait till I come back for you."

He led Miss Longstaffe up the steps, opened the

door and put her inside. "Now," he said, returning to Margaret.

He leaned into the carriage, took her hands, and they looked into each other's face.

"Are you frozen?" he asked.

"Almost."

Nothing else was said, and they went up the steps together most demurely; but when they entered the hall, Miss Longstaffe saw by the look in their eyes that her chaperonage had been successfully evaded. In her present temper, such a defeat could be only a temporary one, and merely taught her to redouble her energies and discard the least concession even to ordinary politeness as dangerous.

"Let me take your wraps," said Dr. Walton to Margaret.

"*I will take Mrs. Kent's wraps,*" put in Miss Longstaffe; and, as if the younger woman had been a child, she began to remove her cloak and jacket, hood and veil. It was a captivating process for Dr. Walton to watch Margaret emerge like a rose from its sheath. He was not wholly sorry that Miss Longstaffe was there to hold a half-threat over him. He would not for the world have forgotten, even for a moment, that his uncle lay ill, — all his powers ebbing towards their final close, but still quickening with this last desire to see Margaret. Yet how could a man remember anything, looking into her face as he looked now?

"It was good of Miss Longstaffe to come," he remarked. "I will devote myself to her, while you,

Mrs. Kent, shall make the hours go by for Uncle Bert."

"Yes," said Margaret. "You and Miss Longstaffe shall talk together all day. Is there any danger of my tiring Mr. Bell?"

"I will look out for that. I will go up now, and you can both follow presently. Here is Robbins, ready to offer you a little refreshment in the dining-room."

Miss Longstaffe refused to accept anything, but Margaret took a cup of coffee. Her long vigil had told upon her strength a little, and she was conscious of a tremulous excitement. When she went upstairs and entered the room where Mr. Bell lay, on a broad lounge before an open fire, he looked at her with surprise. Neither he nor anyone had ever seen her half so beautiful. A dark line round her eyes seemed to deepen and exalt their brilliancy; she was unusually pale, — but before one could remark upon her pallor a rosy flush would steal across her face, and die away only to return again.

"I am glad to see you, Margaret," said Mr. Bell. "I thought yesterday that perhaps I might never see you again. There was desolation in that."

"But you are better to-day — almost well; and, please God, we shall see each other for years yet."

The old man held her hand, and looked up into her face and smiled. She leaned down and touched her lips to his forehead. "How could you be imprudent and get sick?" she asked, with a soft petulance. "You, too, who can be so wise."

"Here is Miss Longstaffe," said Mr. Bell. "I am so glad you have come, dear friend. Do you know that when I believed I might be dying I thought of this pretty, harum-scarum young woman with a sort of pang at leaving her alone, with nobody who knew her just as I did to take care of her; but, remembering you," — here he pressed Miss Longstaffe's hand — "I said to myself, 'God is good; he has given her a better and more disinterested friend than I have been to her.'"

"I want to take good care of Mrs. Kent," said Miss Longstaffe, a slight change passing over her features; "and I mean to, whether she wishes it or not."

"We will all take care of Mrs. Kent," said Alex, laughing slightly. "She shall, to begin with, sit down, and in that chair, for she looks tired. It is a terribly cold day for so long a drive. There! Uncle Bert, you can look in her face, can you not? Miss Longstaffe, here is a comfortable place for you."

"You are not cold, Margaret," said Mr. Bell. "You were well wrapped up."

"Like an Esquimau. It is terrible weather. Gladys sent her love to you, and wanted me to bring some corn she popped out big and white herself for you yesterday, but I told her that was not invalid's food."

"Dear little Gladys! It was too cold for her to come, otherwise I should like to have had her here. I must gain all the days I can. Did you ever do a pleasant thing thinking it was for the last time?"

Mr. Bell was so much better, it was difficult to

believe that he had been very ill, and the slight touch of languor he had felt before had vanished at the sight of Mrs. Kent. He lay on the white flowered couch, looking as if at ease in heart and mind. Margaret sat close beside him, so near that he could touch her hand when he stretched out his. Miss Longstaffe was on the other side, in a deep chair, whose recesses she did not explore, seeming to prefer to perch uncomfortably on the edge. Alex had taken a place on the window-seat: he could see Margaret and she could see him, but he was out of range of the others' eyes.

"No," answered Margaret to Mr. Bell's question; "I have done *unpleasant* things hoping it was for the last time."

"Then you don't know the preciousness of opportunity. One ought to make the most of last times."

"But I could not bear to feel that a pleasant thing was happening for the last time. I always wondered how that group could have sat around Socrates on his last day and talked. But then I am a foolish woman and should have to be sent away like poor Xantippe."

Mr. Bell smiled. "Suppose," he said, "that you loved a man and knew that he was to die on the morrow—that you had just twenty-four hours with him."

"I should die, too," said Margaret, flushing softly and dropping her eyes. "I just told you I could not bear such things."

"We will not have him die then. Say that you

knew a thing that must part you on the morrow, which perhaps he did not suspect. Should you not try to snatch a little pleasure from the very jaws of loss?"

"Yes: I might say — 'Who knows but the world may end to-night?'" exclaimed Margaret.

"Oh, you are quoting Browning."

"Isn't that what you poets are for," said Margaret, laughing slightly. "'You tell what we feel only.' It is safer to quote. Besides, it is the poets who have taught us the worth and sweetness of our own emotions."

"Nonsense," said Alex's voice from the window-seat. "For one, I declare myself free of the vice of taking passion at second-hand. I will be my own poet."

Nobody answered him, unless the sight of the rosy flush on Margaret's averted cheek may have seemed to him a sort of reply. Mr. Bell began to talk about Browning, and Margaret repeated bits which he suggested. She recited poetry very well, having a good enunciation in spite of her southern accent, and a quick musical feeling for rhythm as well as meaning. Strange to say, all the poems which came to Mr. Bell's mind were of disastrous loss, of quarrels, of partings.

Dr. Walton understood that Margaret yielded to the old man's whim partly that he might be diverted and restrained from talking, and partly because she loved the poems herself. He thought of somebody's description of a woman, that all the poetry of all the

poets should be written on her heart. He was a little jealous of all this knowledge of hers of passion and of pain; then laughed at his own folly, remembering it was a mere trick of the memory and the lips,—that if she knew what it meant as a man meant, she could not have uttered a syllable.

“Dearest, three months ago !
When we lived blocked up with snow, —
When the wind would edge
In and in his wedge,
In as far as the point could go —
Not to one ingle though,
Where we loved each the other so !”

What did she mean by giving this archly and gayly; and this:—

“Were you happy ?” “Yes.” “And are you still as happy ?”
“Yes — and you ?”
“Then more kisses.” “Did I stop them, when a million seemed so few ?”

Alex had to leave his seat and stride about. It seemed to him she was mocking him with the sweetness which could not answer nor soothe him.

“You are very restless, Alex,” said Mr. Bell. “Don’t stay here if you have something else to do. I am delightfully entertained. Mrs. Kent is a good cordial.”

“Thanks, Uncle Bert,” Alex answered dryly. “I’m getting on very well. I’m very well pleased to see you look better; but don’t overdo it.”

“I’m only lying still and having poetry recited. Margaret, do you remember ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ ?”

“I’m not certain.”

"Alex, give her that volume of Browning with the sage-green cover. If it bores you to hear it, go out."

Alex brought the book.

Margaret lifted her eyes as he gave it to her.

"Are you bored, Dr. Walton?" she asked, a little mischievously.

"A little," he replied, smiling.

"I should like to know what could content you, you prosaic fellow," said Mr. Bell.

"I know very well what would content me," said Alex; "but then my contentment is an unimportant matter to-day. It is enough that you are contented."

"Well, of all the unchivalrous boys of this generation, you are the worst I have encountered. I wish some '*belle dame sans merci*' could put you under thrall."

"I should like the *belle dame*, but I should implore her to be merciful."

"You would be the merciless one. Margaret, what is that bit you used to be fond of, where the prince journeying to his bride meets a milkmaid, who gives him a magical draught of milk."

Margaret laughed and hesitated a moment, then began.

Was it milk now, or was it cream?

Was she a maid, or an evil dream?

Her eyes began to glitter and gleam;

He would have gone, but he stayed instead;

Green they gleamed as he looked in them:

"Give me my fee," she said.

"I will give you a jewel of gold."
"Not so ; gold is heavy and cold."
"I will give you a velvet fold,
Of foreign work, your beauty to deck."
"Better I like my kerchief rolled
Light and white round my neck."

"Nay," cried he, "but fix your own fee."
She laughed. "You may give the full moon to me ;
Or else sit under this apple-tree
Here for one idle day at my side ;
After that I'll let you go free,
And the world is wide."

She paused. "Did he stay ?" asked Alex. "But of course he stayed. What happened for his staying?"

"Disaster," Margaret answered. She had suddenly grown pale.

She took up the volume of Browning, opened at the poem Mr. Bell had asked for, and began to read at once. Alex stood directly in front, looking down at her. He was fascinated — by the verses perhaps, or was it something in Margaret's face which held him there? She read on and on.

"Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud ; at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me ; surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew
While I debated what to do.

"That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good ; I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around,

“And strangled her. No pain felt she ;
I am quite sure she felt no pain.
As a shut bud that holds a bee,
I warily oped her lids : again
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.”

Alex caught the book from her hand.

“Don’t read that horrible, horrible thing,” said he, with a shudder. “How can you stand it? Barren æstheticism like that is beyond me. I have nerves, blood, a heart.”

Mr. Bell was annoyed by his nephew’s brusqueness.

“Suppose you ring the bell, and let Robbins offer the ladies something,” said he.

Alex walked away and out of the room. He felt incapable of controlling himself.

These signs of her power over him Margaret enjoyed as any woman would, and when he came back she looked up at him with a sort of wayward mischief. The poetry had stimulated her; the tense, over-wrought mood of the morning was over. She had brought a bit of work in her bag, and had taken it up and was quite busy over it. Occupation always made Margaret happy, and she was now in a delightful mood. She made Miss Longstaffe draw close, and gave each of the quartette a full place in the talk. The afternoon was too short, for at four o’clock the fiat went forth from the doctor that the patient must go back to his room.

“I have lived to-day,” said Mr. Bell; “and perhaps I may continue to exist until we meet again, Margaret.”

Alex had hoped to exchange a word or two with her alone, but Miss Longstaffe gave him no opportunity. He laughed and sighed as he shook hands with her after putting her in the carriage; and she laughed back at him, without the sigh. He stood watching the wheels as they vanished down the drive, when the twilight swallowed them up. The snow had ceased falling, but not a gleam from the departing day lit the clouds. It had been an irksome experience to him, and he had been all day horribly jealous of his uncle. When had Margaret learned all those witch's arts?

CHAPTER XVIII.

PORPHYRIA.

It was a difficult matter for Dr. Walton to decide whether to attach a deep importance to his uncle's confessions during his delirium, or to regard them as ordinary fever fantasies. The next day Mr. Bell was much improved in health, but had a melancholy air, seemed consumed with ennui, and talked about going to the Mediterranean as soon as he was well enough.

"Shall you think of setting out alone, sir?" his nephew asked.

"Who would go with me?"

"I wonder, Uncle Bert, that you have never married," said Alex. "I know that you were once engaged to a woman, in your youth,—but that is long ago. You have been in society,—free to choose,—you were rich,—yes, I confess I wonder that you did not marry."

"Yes, it is singular, perhaps," said Mr. Bell. A little discontent appeared on his face, as if he were half annoyed at being misunderstood. "I am old,—I seem to have lived a long time," he went on. "That old wound of mine healed long ago; still, looking back, it seems but yesterday."

"Of course one does not get over such sorrows. But still, a man like yourself—without wife or children—"

"I know,—it is deplorable. Reconcile these contradictions as you will, in such matters it is difficult to define one's needs and satisfy one's demands. One woman, and one woman alone, has pleased me. You must know to whom I allude. Her I would have married if I could. We have said enough on that subject, I think."

Alex pressed his uncle's hand. He was inexpressibly grateful to him. The day before, he had felt the dilemma to be a trying one. In the face of his uncle's wish to marry Mrs. Kent, there would have been something almost brutal in making a display of his own happiness in winning her. After this little talk it seemed to him likely that things would settle themselves. At least he might go to see Margaret, tell her the news,—and—it was scarcely worth while to make out a programme. Provided Miss Longstaffe kept out of the way, he was not likely to be at a loss. Mr. Bell himself bade Alex go out into the air and sunshine. He himself was well enough, he affirmed, to get up, dress, and lie down on the couch in the next room. In short, Alex went to town with a light heart.

In the country the snow still lay unmelted, but in the city rivulets trickled from the roofs; the crossings were impassable, the pavements thick with mire. As Alex left the station he stood on the curbstone, in doubt which road to choose. A lady's coupé was

passing, and a hand was waved from the window; the driver checked his horse, and Mrs. Townsend let down the glass.

"Oh, Dr. Walton," she said, "won't you get in? I want so much to ask about your uncle. I hope he is better."

"He is better, thanks."

"Pray get in. I will take you anywhere."

"No, thanks, a horse-car is better for me, with my muddy boots."

"But I insist. I wish particularly to hear about Mr. Bell. Do oblige me. Where did you wish to go?"

Dr. Walton was annoyed by her pertinacity; but it seemed churlish to decline her offer of a lift, though once inside the carriage he was annoyed that he had yielded. He had in fact been too much engrossed in his own thoughts to rally his powers to his aid against this feminine imperiousness. She began to question him so closely regarding his uncle's symptoms and state that he remembered to have heard that she was a newspaper reporter. But, after all, what did it matter? The ordeal would be over in five minutes more; and if an account of Mr. Bell's attack was going into the papers, it might as well be authentic.

"I went to see Mrs. Kent yesterday to ask about it," Mrs. Townsend purred on. "I knew she would have heard. There was always something touching in Mr. Bell's devotion to her—so loyal, so chivalrous. Nobody could question the exquisite propriety of the friendship. But, at the same time, I always felt sure

that it was a romance. A woman always feels by instinct the romantic in any situation. Don't you think so?"

"I dare say. Women have a great many feelings."

"Oh, there is some cynical meaning behind that. But anyone might divine that Mrs. Kent is a woman to inspire romance. Everybody says that if she were free to marry she would choose Roger Charlton; but, for my part, I always had a different theory."

She was looking at Dr. Walton smiling and coquetish, her head a little on one side, but was startled out of her pretty pose by some indefinable change in him. Something seemed to have come between them. She hardly knew what her impression was. For a moment something had been there, but now it was not there. He was not even looking at her, but out of the carriage window.

"How do you mean not free to marry?" he inquired.

"She has a husband living, you know. There is no secret in that."

"A husband does seem to be an impediment," said Dr. Walton. "Will you kindly let me out just here, Mrs. Townsend? A thousand thanks for your goodness."

Once on the pavement, Alex walked straight on, although it was West Twenty-Fifth Street, and he had no errand in that direction. He had a desire to be alone, feeling as if an opportunity for reflection would calm the physical sensation which made him giddy and sick. He could hardly command himself,

and felt a desire to sit down. He retraced his steps, walked down Fifth Avenue, and went into the club. He had no peace there. He was surrounded at once and plied with questions concerning his uncle. It was not easy for him to speak. He experienced a numbness, a torpor, which made it difficult for him to frame the most commonplace sentences. He was conscious of producing a singular impression on the acquaintances who addressed him, but never in his life had he suffered such a sense of oppression. As soon as he could shake off the urgent inquirers, he looked at his watch, pleaded an engagement, and abruptly left the place.

"I will go and find out from herself," he exclaimed audibly, to himself. What was it all about? What absurd delusions possessed people? He laughed an odd-sounding laugh to reassure himself, but he was not reassured. The idea was a tangible horror to him. He was afraid of it, longed to shut it away from his consciousness. Why not deny it? Uttered as a calumny, Alex might have been little moved by the suggestion. As it was, Mrs. Townsend had given the fact without special emphasis, as if it were nothing particular. It was true; he knew it was true. Yet the idea was one he could not take in. He remembered Margaret's face—the expression with which she had looked up at him. "Oh, heavens!" he said. He was utterly confounded. He was not angry yet. A torpor held his brain in a half-slumber. He said to himself alternately, "It must be so;" then, "Impossible! it cannot be so!"

By this time he was ringing the door-bell; Mrs. Kent was at home, and the servant, remembering his unceremonious visit two nights before, asked him to go up at once. He found Miss Longstaffe sitting in the parlor. He bowed to her and asked for Margaret.

"She is in her room," said Miss Longstaffe. "I will call her at once. But first, Dr. Walton, I should like to have one word with you."

"I must ask you to postpone it," said Alex, succinctly. "I have a particular wish to see Mrs. Kent this very moment, and without witnesses."

Miss Longstaffe rose, overcome by an apprehension she could not have accounted for. Her little expedient for enforcing proprieties seemed trivial, even impertinent. She could only obey, for there was something in Dr. Walton's face and tone of voice which frightened her. She went to Margaret's door and beckoned her, then herself went upstairs. Margaret was standing with her hands clasped, waiting to hear that Dr. Walton had come. Miss Longstaffe's grimness and taciturnity were nothing so unusual as to inspire the least surprise, and she ran out to her visitor on the instant, with a joyful welcome ready on her tongue. A thousand thoughts were in her mind, ready to bubble up in jest and laughter. There were little droll fancies, and bits of wisdom, all of which were to be poured out to Alex. This was to be a continuation of yesterday. She had no presentiment that the day of judgment had dawned.

Alex was standing waiting to receive her. His back was towards the light, which fell on her face and dazzled her. She went up to him, holding out a little warm, white hand in welcome, her motion growing a little less swift and eager as she neared him, as if she counted on his coming half way to meet her.

He did not move, did not take the proffered hand, and did not at first speak. She looked into his face timidly. Her whole expression changed into something childlike and deprecating. A moment before she had been a brilliant woman, full of power to charm; now she was something quite different. She was under the influence of various confused feelings. Her conscience awoke, but its monitions were hazy and inert. She might have fancied that Alex had come to tell her some bad news concerning Mr. Bell; but her instincts were too keen for that. The language of his eyes, and his stern, repellant manner, indicated some strange change in him: what he had to say was something which regarded their own relations.

She contrived to look up at him, all the blood gradually ebbing from her face, but her pallor seeming to heighten her beauty and the brilliancy of her eyes. Alex felt as if he were looking through a thick black mist, and she was the only bright thing in the world.

"Is it true that you are married — that you have a husband living?" he said, in a low voice.

"Did you not know it?" she faltered.

"Know it?" he repeated with scorn. "I know it? What do you think of me?"

He retreated from her with a look as of utter loathing, moving back inch by inch, and step by step, until he leaned against the window, when he paused, bracing himself as if to repel approach. His manner indicated what was not true: he was in reality cut to the heart, — his whole soul seemed to be shuddering out of him. He was choking with passion, — shivers ran through him. He was troubled and terribly angry, — but — but this was the woman into whose face he had looked yesterday with love, with tenderness, with grateful joy that she was to be his. He could not help at this moment feeling her beauty so that it made him full of insane and wicked passion. The airy curls about her forehead, the white throat, the little wrists emerging from the nests of lace, that red mouth like a flower, the symmetry of her form, — not one of her charms but stung him into a sort of blind jealous rage. . . . She had been making a fool of him, ensnaring him for her own amusement. What did she want of him? What demon of wickedness or coquetry had impelled her? Had there not been whispers against her? He had grown as pale as death — his features twitched, he raised his hand as if to protect himself.

She too had retreated.

"I thought you knew. How could you not know?" she asked, staring at him. "Everybody knows that I have a husband. He is in South America."

"It is so, then," he said, looking straight at her. "Allow me to state the fact, simply as my own vindication, that I supposed you to be a widow."

Margaret had at first met his glance; then, under the domination of a shame more intense than anything she had ever in all her life felt, her own eyes fell. She grew crimson. She could not answer a word. Not a sound escaped her lips. There was no longer any veil of extenuation or palliation between her consciousness and what she had done. Everything was frightfully distinct. It all seemed hideous, monstrous, to remember. Her impressions shifted every moment: she was tortured by every sort of stinging remembrance of careless words said, and acts committed. She was lost in this chaos, and saw no way out. She was conscious of but one wish; and that was to die—at least to find oblivion.

"Good God! Have you not a word to say?" asked Alex. "Two nights ago I believed myself to be your affianced lover,—and what am I to-day? Tell me,—I beg you to enlighten my dull understanding concerning the precise nature of your caprice. What rôle was I to fill in your life?"

She turned now, and looked at him. There was a look of pain but still more of stupefaction on her burning face. In a listless, mechanical way she crossed the room to a davenport, opened a drawer, and took out a letter, which, with the wooden movement of an automaton, she brought and held out towards him.

"Do you mean that I am to read this?" he asked.

She nodded.

"It is from my uncle." He opened it with eager curiosity, thinking there might prove to be something comprehensible in what was at present absolutely without logic or reason to his mind. His eye ran impatiently over the preamble, but fastened with deep interest upon the later passages; the one coveted fact gained, he flung the sheet down.

"Oh, you were going to have a divorce!" he said, in a peculiar tone. There was a moment's silence, which she did not try to break. "That was a magnanimous intention," he then went on, with added force. "Although you are legally bound to your present husband, there are vital possibilities ahead. Personally I must express my gratitude. May I flatter myself that you were thinking of me at all in the business?"

"It is a hopeless matter for me to attempt to tell the whole story," said Margaret, in a voice she could not at first command, but which seemed to gather strength as she went on. "I could not tell it, and you would not have the patience to listen. But there has been a pressure upon me —"

She broke off helpless, feeling something not only angry but ironic in his fixed gaze.

"Pressure?" he repeated sarcastically. "I should think so. You seem besieged with lovers on every side. Here was I; then there is my uncle, and who is the lucky man in whose favor he resigns his own hopes?"

She averted her face, trembling from head to foot.

"Oh, is not this a little over-cruel, Dr. Walton?" she said, stung by what seemed to her unmerited humiliation. "If you have been deceived as to my condition, was it I who have deceived you?"

"Who besides?" he demanded inflexibly.

"I never for an instant thought of deceiving you," she cried, tremulously. "If you seemed to care for me, was it I who tried to make you think of me? Did you not come of your own free will, and return by your own wish? What did I say or do to bring you—to keep you? And when your uncle, whom I loved and trusted so entirely, wrote me in that way—how could I help feeling that safety, security, happiness, lay in following such advice. It seemed all to have been settled for me. I was so tired of struggling—it seemed heaven to—Oh, for me to have to tell you this! I don't understand,—I cannot understand. Your uncle says in his letter that you had spoken to him about it all. I felt that it had been all wisely settled between you both. And when you came the other night—what was I to suppose except that—" She paused, and again that deep flush swept over her like a wave of fire.

He looked at her pleading face while she was speaking; then, when she broke off and turned away, his glance dropped to the floor, and he stood evidently trying to think the matter out to a logical conclusion.

After a time he said, in a stiff, changed voice, "It was not I Uncle Bert wished you to marry after getting a divorce."

"You are quite wrong. I do not understand it at all, but you are wrong."

"I assure you your inference flatters my presumption. Yet I must tell the truth. The real fact is that Uncle Bert has no idea that I ever thought twice of you. It is utterly impossible that he should have guessed it. Our acquaintance progressed without his knowledge, and in my conversations with him I have never uttered a syllable which could have put such a fancy into his mind. No; you were reserved for some more fortunate man, some child of good luck,—like Roger Charlton. I feel, I know, I will swear that the man for whom my poor old uncle renounced you was Charlton, and none other."

She raised her eyes to his angry face with a look that, in spite of his bitter, burning rage, silenced him. A man who could torture some wounded thing which had fluttered at his feet was the only one who could have driven the blow nearer home. Alex was, in fact, coerced by a jealousy which maddened him; but her glance still touched his heart.

"I see it all now," she said, too utterly wretched to assert her woman's pride any more. "My sin has found me out. I was not happy. I was not fortunate in my life. I had little or nothing to be faithful to, except what wearied and depressed me; but I wanted to put all that aside and be happy and fortunate in some other way. It seemed only my right to have things come about pleasantly. I wanted to manage my life in spite of fate. I was so young; everything I did not have seemed so tempting and so beautiful." Her voice died away in sobs.

He came towards her. He was pale as death.

"Tell me one thing," said he. "Is — is Charlton anything to you?"

She retreated a step, looking at him proudly.

"Nothing, nothing!" she answered. "How utterly foolish to put such a question to me!"

"Is there any man — leaving that one who is in South America out of the question — who stands in a nearer place than —" his face grew crimson — "than I?" he said, finishing under his breath.

She gave him a proud, strange glance. He no longer seemed near to her. It had already become incredible that she could ever have believed that she had any right to love and happiness. She must have known all the time that everything in her past and present alike shut her away from him. In fact, just at this moment it was little of Alexander Walton she was thinking in the softer ways of love. He was Nemesis — the avenging fate who had brought her fault home to her.

"Dr. Walton, —" she began. But something in his look and attitude startled and thrilled her. She trembled; he was coming towards her, and she put out both her hands as if to ward him off.

"Tell me," he said, imperatively.

"You know. I do not need to tell you. But that is over — quite over."

The blood rushed to his face.

"It is not over for me," said he. He seized both her hands, crushing them between his, — he drew her forcibly towards him, and pressed her to his breast.

Margaret struggled violently for an instant, then he loosed her hands and pushed her away from him. He had yielded but a moment to a feeling he wholly despised in himself. He loved her with all his heart and soul, but he half scorned and hated while he loved her. It was impossible for him to believe that she had been innocent in leading him on. He tried to break away, but was impelled to say something more ; he could hold a grip over his tongue nevertheless, little as he could silence his heart. He remembered the poems she had recited the day before.

"Then more kisses." "Did I stop them, when a million seemed so few?"

And how archly she had smiled, not caring.

He stamped his foot, cursing his own weakness, and turned away.

"That Porphyria," he muttered hoarsely, "do you remember?"

She gave a cry and flung up her hands.

"Kill me if you like," she said, brokenly. "I am too unhappy to want to live."

"When you read that," said he, inflexibly, "I ought to have seen — I ought to have known."

She could bear no more ; she tottered over to a chair, sat down and leaned her head on the table, clasping two hands above it. He looked at her fixedly for a moment ; then, without a word of leave-taking, went out.

CHAPTER XIX.

BLUNDERINGS AND STRIVINGS.

It was about an hour later that Miss Longstaffe, who had watched Dr. Walton go away, crept downstairs from her studio and looked in at the parlor door. Margaret still sat leaning her head on the table, in an unchanged attitude. Gladys had come in, and, finding her mother motionless and speechless, had crouched down at her feet, hiding her face in the folds of the dress. It seemed to the child that the end of things had at last come. A thousand whispers, voices and monitions peeping at her out of the dark, now seemed to have taken shape and gathered force before her eyes.

"Oh, Cousin Sarah!" cried Gladys, as she saw the grim familiar face at the door. "Come in and comfort poor mamma. It has happened. I knew it was going to happen, and now it has happened."

"What has happened?" said Miss Longstaffe. "What is it, Margaret? Look up and tell me what it is."

Margaret looked up. She was very pale, but she was half smiling. A tear or two had dried on her cheek, and there were marks of the hard corners of the table on her temple. She put her hand to her

forehead as if puzzled. "Is that you, Gladys?" she said. "I had no idea you were there. What are you crying about?" For the child's tense mood was now melting in a paroxysm of grief.

"You did not move, mamma," she gasped, "and I thought at first that you were dead. And then —"

"What is it, Margaret?" interrupted Miss Longstaffe, putting her hand on the younger woman's shoulder, and shaking her slightly.

"It is nothing," answered Margaret. She rose and moved her hands and arms about as if to rouse the torpid circulation; then shivered. "I am cold," she said. "Stir the fire, won't you, Sarah; that is a good creature. I am chilled to the very heart."

She sat listlessly about until the fire had been freshly kindled; then, when it burned up brightly, she sat down before it. Both Miss Longstaffe and Gladys watched her motions eagerly, offering little attentions, which she accepted as if half-unconscious of them. She seemed rapt in strange thoughts, to which they could not be admitted.

"Sarah," she said, after a time, turning her face fully from the fire. "don't you remember they used to say about Dante, '*Eccovi l'uom ch' è stato all' Inferno.*'"

"But what of that?"

"I have been there. By the Inferno I mean the place where the dead people are—those who have gone into their graves or out of our lives. And they have all spoken to me. I have seen their faces, I have

heard their voices, I have almost touched their hands. There was my old black mammy, and she cried over me, and prayed for me. 'You'll come to grief, chile, sure,' she said, just in the old way. She used to tell me I was too eager, too headstrong, too fond of my own will. 'Break it yourself, chile,' she would say; 'offer it as a sacrifice all broken up in pieces, for if you wait the Lord will send a whirlwind that will snap it like a dry twig.' Then there was Miss Brown, my old governess, — she was here whispering in my ear, 'You like pleasantness too well, Miss Margaret.' Her reprimands used to be little 'cut-and-dried' sentences, often quotations from great writers. This was one she was forever dinning into my ears: 'Limit your wants. The "*must*" is hard, but only by this *Must* can we show how it is with us in the inner man. To live by caprice requires no particular powers.' What she touched upon she spoiled for me at the time, but there were a thousand of her prim, pointed sayings rising to my mind while I sat here alone. One was, —

'The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to scourge us.'

And another, 'Like diamonds, we are cut with our own dust.' Then came my father, too, with his sweet, sad face, and his 'my daughter,' which always used to make me feel rebellious. He did not say so much as the others; but I knew, as if with long-lingering vibrations of sad music, what was in his heart and mind. I was steeped, as it were, in memories of what he had directed, urged and implored. So he

needed only to look at me, and all his old wise counsels invaded my memory and conscience and usurped the place of my own self-belief. And what seems so strange to me, Sarah, is that although I had long ago heard all these things with my outward ears, I used to think then it was a mere part of the general scheme of existence that older people should be tiresome and dictatorial. It never flashed across me in those days that they knew what they were talking about — that there was a secret in life, which, grasped at the outset, might help one to live easily and well."

She was looking while she spoke into the face of the elder woman, with a clear ardor burning in her eyes and a far-off smile on her lips. "I suppose," she now added, "that these are truisms to you, — that you knew it all by your own soul's promptings."

Miss Longstaffe said nothing, but came closer and pressed Margaret's bright head against her arm, and stroked her hair.

"I have done wrong," said Margaret, her voice breaking a little. "I have thought too little of others, too much of myself." She looked down at Gladys, who knelt at her feet her eyes brimming with love and longing, then leaned over and kissed her. "I have not been a good mother to you, dear," she said softly, "but in future I am going to do better."

"I don't want you to be any better, mamma," cried Gladys, trembling all over.

"Oh, you will see," said Margaret, with a little

smile. "You will not say that when you understand just how good I am going to be."

She had asserted something against her crushing defeat and loss, and was as eager to strive for that new object as she had hitherto striven for what was dearest to her. Miss Longstaffe's mind was busy concerning the causes of this change of mood. She knew by experience the extravagance of that wayward but captivating mind—full of noble impulses, always inconsistent with each other, putting too much force and impetuosity into whatever part it essayed to play. She tried to adjust the talk and the mind of Margaret and Gladys to everyday matters. She urged that the child should be sent to walk with one of the maids in the house. Margaret dressed the little girl in her bravest array, and then, left alone with Miss Longstaffe, fell to putting the rooms in order, with a sort of frenzy, going through the familiar duties in an automatic sort of way, sometimes performing the same one over and over.

"Don't," Miss Longstaffe said finally; "you will make yourself ill. I fancy you are half sick already. I don't like those little red spots on your cheeks and the glitter in your eye."

Margaret laughed and looked into the mirror above the mantel of the middle room. She seemed fascinated by her own reflection.

"How young I look!" she exclaimed. "Do you believe that Marie Antoinette's hair grew white in one night of horror?"

"It is said, you know, that while she was in her

palace she had used dyes, which were not permitted in prison."

"Oh, you sensible Sarah! It sounds better to hear of its growing white in a single night. I do not see how I can look so young. Heaven help me, — I should like to be all at once old."

"I doubt it, Margaret."

"No, you need not doubt it. I'm not going to give up, because I cannot give up. I have got to go on. But I am tired of my strivings and failures. Oh, to have it all over!" She turned her glance upwards, as if to repress coming tears; but her lips quivered. After a moment Miss Longstaffe said,

"Something happened this morning. I saw it in Dr. Walton's face."

Margaret nodded; it had become a struggle for her to maintain her self-command.

"Tell me what it was, dear. Your sorrows are my sorrows. To see you walking heavily is to have my own feet bleed against the sharp stones."

"He came," said Margaret, in a low even voice, "to ask me if I had a husband living. He had taken me for a widow."

Miss Longstaffe, who all along had felt herself walking in darkness, saw everything by a flash of lightning.

"That was it, then! I could not understand it, — never in all my life was I so puzzled. When you consider it, that was a very natural mistake."

Margaret shuddered, she lifted her hands as if to ward off something. But Miss Longstaffe went on with elation,

"I love to keep my faith in people; to find a man ignoble when I thought him good, trivial and vulgar when I had believed him discriminating and fastidious, is a blow. I thought the worse of human nature for having the fact forced upon my convictions that Dr. Walton was run away with by a passion for you. I insist upon each a man being as pure and worthy as he knows how to be."

Margaret's face flamed.

"But what do you think of me?" she cried. "What do you suppose I am feeling while you calmly settle in your own mind that Dr. Walton was deceived?"

"I do not say that he was deceived. I say that it was a very natural mistake. To see a woman with a little girl, living alone, dependent on her own exertions, —"

Miss Longstaffe stopped short. She liked a distinct positive or negative idea regarding all matters which came under her scrutiny. A mixture of good and evil, an edging off from virtuous into dangerous tendencies, bewildered and displeased her. She was glad to understand definitely that Dr. Walton had not intentionally been making love to a married woman; but then she must abstain lovingly from wounding Margaret's feelings. She looked at her with a serious air, and wondered what it was best to say.

Margaret's mind was full of a secret bitterness, which alternately roused her pride and her contrition.

"Yes," she now said, "a woman living alone, dependent on her own exertions, is at the bar of

judgment; she must logically account for her loneliness and poverty, and explain why a legal protector is neither at her side to pay for her bread and butter and new bonnets, nor under the sod altogether."

"Nobody need blame you, dear; people's misapprehensions are their own. You have nothing to reproach yourself with."

"Nothing," said Margaret, with a short laugh. "That is my opinion. Theoretically, it is all very nice to say that a woman should guard herself sacredly from misconstruction, slander, and the persecutions of lovers. Practically, we all know it is impossible."

Miss Longstaffe looked at her, finding her mood rather incomprehensible.

"I like living prettily, like this," Margaret went on. "I had my work and I did it, working as hard as I knew how to work. I pinched myself, as you know, Sarah. I have a good, healthy appetite, but I have gone hungry. I declare to you that the tempting things in the shop windows have often made my mouth water. But I never spent a cent on that sort of self-indulgence. My extravagance ran in another line: I liked dainty appointments for my tea-table — pretty china, the most expensive bread and butter, and the highest-priced tea. I liked to exercise a graceful hospitality."

Miss Longstaffe assented, and Margaret went on: "I had my own life to do what I wanted with; or so I flattered myself. The first necessity seemed to be to understand the facts of my position; the second

was to accept the existing state of things, and be as happy in it as I might; while the third surely was to better myself and the existing state of things as far as possible."

Margaret was walking up and down, excited and animated. She now stopped short, and bent a deep gaze on Miss Longstaffe.

"It was all very nice having those men come in every day. They were all well-bred, gentlemanly young fellows. I knew, of course, that three of them, at least, were a little in love with me."

"You might say five."

"No; I meant only Roger Charlton and the Updegraffs. The others may have admired me, but for those three I named I was chief heroine of the drama. The bell rang and the curtain went up only when I entered. Their fancy for me never troubled my conscience heavily. They were none of them destitute of high principle and a nice sense of honor. I could rest on that. Even when, at times, I received substantial benefits from them, I had no results to dread. They piqued themselves on a certain magnanimity where I was concerned."

"You accepted no direct benefits from them."

"I love to have you say so," said Margaret, with a burning blush, dropping her eyes. "Certainly, I took no money from them,—still—still—Oh, you know it all, Sarah, so no matter. I was used to trying to please them—"

"You pleased them without the trying."

"Well, it was natural for me to like to have an

audience, as it were. I did not feel my youth and beauty wasted — even Mr. Bell —”

“You may well count Mr. Bell. He loved you — he worshipped you.”

“Yes, I know it. Well — well — as I was going to say, —” Margaret had half turned away; a certain tremor and agitation became visible in her.

“What is it, dear child?” asked Miss Longstaffe.

“I saw Dr. Walton. The first moment my glance fell on him, I felt restless and discontented. He was forever in my thoughts. I supposed at first that he was engaged to Miss Devereux. I perpetually said to myself, ‘Oh, what good fortune comes to some people!’ And the poor results of my own life rose up and mocked me. . . . I used to wonder how it must seem to have a man like that in love with one. . . . I decided I should not like it — he was too Jove-like, I should have been annihilated, like Semele. . . . Then, the moment we really met, he was attracted. In fact he was attracted the moment we saw each other in the wood. . . . I tell you, Sarah, it was to be so, it ought to have been so. It was spontaneous, heaven-born; it was meant that we were to marry each other! The seed was laid in both our hearts. We had but to meet, and it grew with tropical luxuriance!”

She spoke with intensity; her eyes were burning; occasionally a tear escaped them, but her features were perfectly calm. She looked strong and resolute.

“Did you ever love a man, Sarah?” she asked.

“Never.”

“Then you don’t know. When I was with him I was perfectly happy — if he looked at me, and he did look constantly, I was suffocated with joy. Yet we were not silly nor trivial. He talked to me of all sorts of serious matters. Sometimes I was surprised to find myself answering with real cleverness. He would listen to me as if — as if we were equals; and when I said a thing he liked, he smiled. And when he smiled — I felt — I felt myself drawn upwards.”

“Had you better remember all this?”

“Oh, yes, — it will do no harm. I was quite unconscious of what my feelings were, until Aunt Dora came to me that day with the letter about Robert, and insisted that I should have a divorce. I had not been frightened to think Dr. Walton cared for me — because, — see the close logic of it all, — because those foolish young men had also been in love with me. I had played with fire and it had not burned me — in fact, I had found it a bright little plaything, easily quenched when it grew troublesome. But the suggestion of a possible divorce — coming, too, just at that moment when all my consciousness was giving definite shape and meaning to what had before been diffused and indistinct — seemed the solution of all my problems. To have it forced upon me, too, by my relations — people who had the liveliest sense of what was fitting and in good taste for me — was a sensible relief. I could reflect it was no mere youthful restlessness and longing of my own, which might change; but that there

was, in fact, a crying evil in my life, which society was bound to heal. Next, as a hammer to drive in the wedge, already deeply inserted, arrived Mr. Bell's letter. Then I gave up the battle,—or I almost gave it up."

Margaret was pacing the floor again.

"How could I make a firm stand against him when he came that night?" she asked, in a broken-hearted voice. "I did not give up all at once. And then yesterday—you saw how it was yesterday, Sarah." She paused and looked piteously at Miss Longstaffe. "And yet,—and yet," she went on, her voice broken by sobs, "I had nothing to say to-day. I had not a word to say. My woman's shame devoured me, body and soul. He knew and I knew that—how can I say it?—for he had—he had kissed me, twice, once on my hair and then yesterday. And—when—he—had—kissed—me—he had known nothing of my not being free. I had been, he supposed, his affianced wife—Sarah, think of it—I had to listen while he said that it was his vindication that he supposed me to be a widow. And I was not a widow. I knew that I was a married woman,—I had known it all the time. I had not attempted to delude myself. I had simply listened to the voice of the charmer who had talked about my being free. I had got used to not thinking of Robert as a necessary part of my life. And my mind had travelled on—a woman's mind is a lively one and does not stop at a trifle—had travelled on past the slight barrier of a husband, through the arid deserts of a trial for divorce,

into the paradise of a happy second marriage. And Dr. Walton understood it all — that is, he understood it as the alternative of believing me a temptress — and I had to go on living with his eyes on me.”

She had come up to Miss Longstaffe, her face knotted into such strange lines of pain and horror that it was hardly recognizable. Miss Longstaffe was stirred with a mixed emotion of love and wrath.

“What did he say?” she whispered.

“Not much. He was not over-generous, but he did not say the worst that came into his head; still, I knew what he was thinking. I am glad he despises me,” she said, recklessly. “I am glad he hates me. I wish he had called me names, stamped on me, spit on me.”

“Oh, Margaret, don’t utter such words.”

“But I deserve it. And you don’t know how he looked at me! Oh, my God! if ever I forget again,— if ever I am eager for pleasure, for the admiration and the homage of anyone alive — let me remember how that man looked at me as he retreated from me. It was as if I were something to inspire loathing.”

Miss Longstaffe caught both the little cold hands, which Margaret had pressed against her breast, and began to caress them — half in pity, and half to chafe them into warmth.

“Come, come, forget it all,” she said. “He is disappointed and in a passion. He will get over both his disappointment and his passion.”

“Oh, yes,” said Margaret, wearily. “He will get

over both. I don't flatter myself that I have spoiled his life. He has plenty of compensations in store. I shall get over my bruises too. These things will all be as though they were not." She withdrew her hands, crossed the room, and sat down in a chair by the fire. At that moment a tap came at the door. Miss Longstaffe opened it. The servant brought a card — Colonel Weir's card — and asked if the ladies were at home.

"No, not at home," said Margaret. "We are not at home to anyone."

It was past four o'clock. The day had gone somehow. Everything looked remote and unfamiliar to Margaret's eyes as she stared about the room.

"It is all going to be very different," she said to Miss Longstaffe, who now took a chair beside her.

"How different?"

"I am going to reform," said Margaret, with some of her old whim and archness. "I am going to give up all that I have ever done, and do only what I have heretofore left undone. I should like a new heaven and a new earth, in order to begin fair. I should like at least new chairs and tables. If I were a Romanist, I might leave all behind me and go into a convent, wear serge and sackcloth, renounce my long hair and the world, sing chants and fast kneeling. But I cannot very well give up Gladys."

"No; you cannot give up what has heretofore made your real life. You can discard only what was alien and unfitting. I don't know many better and nobler women than you are."

Margaret burst into tears. "Oh, it's good of you to say that, dear," she gasped; "but you had better not flatter the rudimentary conscience which has been roused in me to-day, and soothe it back into peace again. I've got a burning pain in my heart, — and flashes of strange insight through my brain, — which give me dim conceptions of what a poor creature I have always been, and am, and shall continue to be unless I do something to help myself. I must make a struggle — I must — I will. I cannot allow myself to go on sinking lower and lower — to be doing weak, vain things and hating myself for them."

Miss Longstaffe leaned over and put her hand on her shoulder. "Tell me one thing," she whispered; "shall you do what everybody has been advising?"

Margaret did not answer for a moment. She was becoming physically exhausted, and it was necessary for her to grope about in her memory to get an idea of the other's meaning. She answered languidly, after a time,

"No, I shall get no divorce. It used to seem to me *not right*, and I only believed it to be right when I was carried away by ideas which will never enter my mind again. I don't blame Robert altogether. He must have found out that I did not love and believe in him; and when a man like that sees that he is half-despised and rejected, he has to assert his own faith in himself by getting some form of comfort out of life. I ought not to have married him in the first place. But he is Gladys' father, and I don't know what sort of an emptiness and vacancy the world

would be to me if I hadn't Gladys now. And of late, since I have been thinking of this hideous divorce, — I have scarcely been able to look into her face. Again and again she has wanted to speak to me about her father, and I have silenced her. I have mistrusted that she had a dim presentiment of what was being urged. I must indeed have been selfish and hard and mad to have thought of doing what might give pain to her. But the fact is that only one idea has been in my brain."

She looked up again with an agonized face.

"Sarah," she said, entreatingly, "help me to be noble — help me to be good. Set me a task to do. Give me something to fill my thoughts. Everything rushes upon me with such hideousness. I want no longer to care about happiness — but to accept pain to bear, to choose work for others, and unselfishness, and some sweet beautiful hope outside of my own love of enjoyment. Oh, help me."

She threw herself at the feet of the elder woman, and buried her face in the folds of her dress.

CHAPTER XX.

UNCLE AND NEPHEW.

ALEX WALTON had always had a certain curiosity concerning the passions of men. He himself could quote Hamlet: —

“Give me that man
That is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him
In my heart’s core —”

but, as a mere matter of physiological and psychological study, he had taken many notes of the warnings, derelictions, and absurd deviations from honesty and decency which had come under his observation when his fellow-beings were controlled by the love of a woman. His theory had been that just as there were men who should never touch a glass of wine, since its effect impaired their will and moral sense, there were certain others who must never yield to any passionate impulse. He had no admiration for Antonys who kissed away kingdoms and provinces. The great struggles and the hard problems of life have nothing to do with the transports, the tremulous delights, and the fierce pangs of love. A man should marry reasonably and live sensibly. As for the intoxication of love, the felicities of an intimate existence with another — they were something to reject if they made self-mastery impossible.

When he emerged from the house, after leaving Margaret without a word more than we have recounted, he was struck by the unfamiliar aspect of things. The houses seemed to tower above him to strange heights. Singular noises, beatings, and reverberations filled his ears. He instinctively put his fingers on his own pulse and found it greatly accelerated. He took a horse-car at the corner, reached the station in a few moments, and caught a train just on the point of starting. In less than half an hour he was again with his uncle, whom he found lying on his couch before the fire, with the empty chair beside him in which Margaret had sat yesterday.

"What! back so soon, Alex!" Mr. Bell asked. "You look ill. Has anything happened?"

"I feel badly. It is trying weather. I am glad to get back to your fire."

"A magnificent idea comes into my head. You had better go to the Mediterranean with me."

"I think I will."

Mr. Bell laughed. There was some irritation in the younger man's look and voice.

"Whom did you see in town?" he asked.

"I dropped in at the club a moment. Besides, I saw Mrs. Townsend and Mrs. Kent."

He spoke the name with apparent unconcern.

"How did you happen to see Mrs. Townsend? I detest the woman. I warn you not to cultivate her."

"There is little danger. But what ails her?"

"It may be prejudice; but — To tell the truth,

she has told stories about Mrs. Kent which roused my indignation. Poor little Margaret! She has few real friends!"

"I supposed she was greatly admired and run after."

"Oh, she is admired; but her unfortunate position — her husband on the other side of the world, doing nothing whatever for her, leaving her, a beautiful young creature, exposed to slander and misconception —"

"What are the slanders?" said Alex. He was sitting in front of the fire, his feet on the fender, his elbows on his knees, supporting his head on his hands. "You know I have not been in New York. What you allude to is something I have had no chance to hear a word about."

Mr. Bell's face grew troubled.

"Roger Charlton has been running after Mrs. Kent a good deal. They were together in Europe. What that woman says is, that Margaret has accepted substantial help from him."

"Do you mean money?"

"It is what she means. Strictly speaking, however, such statements are false. I dare say Charlton has done whatever he could. I doubt if he has ever had the chance to do more than I have done."

"And what have you done, if I may ask?"

"I have used some small influence in getting her poems accepted by magazine editors, and in creating an interest in her stories. I have bought Miss Longstaffe's pictures, and all that. The poor child had

to live. It was always an anxiety of mine lest she should get into debt. She has a large, extravagant way with her, which I dreaded. I am an old man and I could do these things. Roger Charlton is a young fellow and he could not do these things."

"I dare say he did not draw the line where you did." Alex was coerced by a jealous rage which made him long to know the worst and believe the worst.

"Don't take the spiteful tone of the world. Nobody knows but myself just what a fine creature Margaret is. She is just at the age when the love of sensation and novelty is most powerful,—yet she has been really sensible and discreet. I sent for Charlton and had a talk with him about his position regarding her."

"What had he to say?"

"He is anxious to marry her. I have promised to set proceedings in operation by which she can secure a divorce and marry him."

There was a dead silence in the room. After it had gone on until the very ticking of the clock had become oppressive, Mr. Bell spoke again,

"Do you recall what I said to you the night I was so ill?"

"Respecting Mrs. Kent? Yes."

"You understood me?"

"I thought then that you had had thoughts of marrying her yourself."

"I had. I may as well confess to you that I have been a little unsettled and unhinged for months by the feeling—"

“Yes, yes,—” There was some impatience in the tone.

“Don’t think me a dotard. Your time may come yet. We are all heirs of an infinite longing—it belongs to the race. But I have waked up from my dreams and now see myself as I am—an old man on the verge of the grave. My day of belief in ideals may not be over, but my attempt to realize them surely is. There is nobody like her—no one. In all my long life I have seen no other woman so full of charm and force, power to attract instantaneously, and strength and sweetness to bind irresistibly and forever. I miss what is best in life in losing her. And my bitterest sorrow is that I lost my chance by a lack of resolution. At the right moment, if I had spoken,—”

He broke off. “This is impotent—this is foolish,” said he. “She will marry a younger man. That is best for her. After all, youth is love and love is youth. The love of age is a phantasm—”

He was silent again. He wondered that Alex said nothing; although, to be sure, the facts of life were inexorable, and there was no consolation to be administered to a man past seventy, who still hankered after happiness. Alex was probably thinking that, from a physiological point of view, even such absurdity had an interesting side. Still, the conversation had taken a turn which seemed to demand full and reciprocal confidences.

“Alex,” he now asked, “am I boring you?”

“Not in the least. If I am silent, uncle, it is not

that I am not thinking deeply of all that you have said."

"About the matter of my will — I had best say a word. Some months ago, — before this knowledge came to me of what she and Charlton were to each other, —"

"Go on —"

"I had left her a large part of my money. It was hardly fair to you, in any case. Now, as she is to marry Charlton, —"

"Precisely!"

"I shall make a new will. In fact, that other document ought not to be in existence. Charlton is worth millions, I suppose."

"Very likely."

"If you will give me that will, I will burn it now. It lies just there in that drawer."

"I beg pardon. I prefer not to touch it."

"Oh, very well; Robbins shall do it. If I die intestate, you are my heir."

"Oh, don't talk of dying. I may die first."

Alex pushed back his chair and rose. His voice was thick, and his face was deeply flushed. As he tried to move he staggered like a drunken man.

"I have sat over the fire too long," said he, "or perhaps I am faint. I quite forgot, — I have had nothing to eat since eight o'clock."

"And here it is five."

"I'll wait for dinner. I was a little giddy, but now it has passed off." He began to walk up and down the room.

"There is something I have constantly been expecting to hear from you, Alex," said Mr. Bell.

"And what is that?"

"I had thought that you and Elinor Devereux were engaged, or on the point of being engaged."

Alex stopped short. The idea suddenly struck him with overwhelming force that his whole world of hope and belief, which for the past few hours had seemed utterly shattered and going to pieces, offered after all one point of security and promise of safety.

"I have never declared myself as her suitor," he now said, shortly.

"Do you think of doing so?"

"Yes, I shall go over there to-morrow for that purpose."

He spoke with decision. "I know her well," said he. "I have known her all my life. There is no mystery, no subtlety, nothing complex about her position."

Mr. Bell laughed.

"Certainly not."

"I am not a romantic man," said Alex, with a sort of violence. "I don't like tyrannous sentiments. Elinor is a good, safe woman."

"A little too much like Octavia, of a 'holy, cold, and still conversation.'"

"I don't want a Cleopatra," said Alex. "I prefer an Octavia." He put his hand to his head. The room was certainly whirling round. He caught at the arm of a sofa, then flung it off, for it seemed to rise and threaten him. His bewilderment increased,

for all objects seemed to have changed their aspect and position.

“Is the room very warm?” he asked, dully. “I feel —” In another second he had fallen heavily to the floor.

CHAPTER XXI.

A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH.

TWICE that next morning Margaret had turned on her pillow, looked at the light, then hidden her face and renewed her heavy, dream-haunted sleep. She knew when Gladys roused herself and stole out of the room ; but it mingled with her sense of being left alone and at peace, without stimulating exertion either of body or mind. She covered herself from the light of day, as a child does in the darkness at the thought of possible ghosts which may make it tremble. Her dreams were confused and fragmentary, full of extravagant alternations and incongruities, — some jarring discord breaking in upon each. Finally she said to herself that she would sleep no more, — that even the tattered and poverty-stricken realities of her life were better than these absurdities of her imagination ; that she would lie for ten minutes longer, look the new day in the face, and try to see what it had brought her. There must be some work for her to take up ; a story to write, a dress to make, — something imperative, something to make or save money by. By which we may see that her energy was not yet broken, — that life for her was still a drama in which she was

likely to play her part with force. Dulness and sorrow, borne willingly, were still no necessary alternatives in her scheme of existence. She was eager to renounce all that she condemned in her past life, but in its place she would insist on putting fresh occupations and interests, which would demand all her skill and all her strength. It was no part of her character or temperament to let her mind dwell either on the charm of a forbidden joy, or the bitterness and humiliation of awaking from her dream-world. It had never been her way to trammel herself unnecessarily with the past. And it was only in crises that she was apt to see in vivid and clear picturing the whole meaning of her life. Once having gathered a sane interpretation of her experience, she was apt to dismiss it from her thoughts.

While she lay, as she believed, wide-awake, she was startled all at once by the apparition of Gladys emerging from the corner of the room in an odd, even grotesque dress, and with so pale a face that Margaret felt a vague terror, and started up. She then saw that the child was dragging a burden — apparently a terrible burden; and, as she advanced, there was a look of mortal agony growing upon her.

“What is it you have there?” Margaret asked, — or tried to ask, for her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth.

Gladys answered only by a gesture towards the burden she carried, but all at once it was revealed to Margaret that this was her husband, Robert Kent, who was being brought to her, and that he was dead.

It was a horrible thought to her that he was dead, for with it came the belief that his death was partly her own fault. She tried to repel the accusation forced upon her by her conscience, but it pressed deeply upon her heart and brain that she remembered that in some way she had tried to kill him. She knew not how nor wherefore, but that horrible fancy grew upon her every moment, that, if he was dead, it was really by her act.

"You know you said he might be dead, mamma," Gladys now insisted.

At that instant she heard Robert's laugh,—his full, boyish laugh—half derisive and half gay. She uttered a little cry which roused her, and she started up and looked round.

"Thank heaven it was a dream," she exclaimed, with a strange, deep feeling of relief.

"Were you dreaming?" said Miss Longstaffe, who had been standing by the bedside, a little out of sight, but now came into view. "What was it about?"

"Don't ask me," said Margaret. "It was something to shudder at;" and, although the room was full of morning light, she did shudder. She was still too much under the domination of her dream to have a clear grasp of realities, and it did not seem phenomenal that Miss Longstaffe should have come in to wake her. "Oh, it is so good to see your face," she crooned to her, stretching out her hands. "There is something so real, so wholesome, about you, Sarah; you don't belong to the eerie hobgoblin world." She sat up still tremulous, but rosy and

smiling, a crumple of cambric ruffles and lace, her bright hair all in lovely disarray. The phantasms were vanishing. Here was a bright sunshiny morning beckoning her to join its magic circle of glad energies. All her faculties regathered themselves after their long lethargy. She was ready to laugh at her terrors. "Oh, you dear good Sarah," she said, caressingly, and folded her arms about her. "I do love the world of flesh and blood," she exclaimed, with a brief sob; "I hate ghosts, demons, — even angels."

Miss Longstaffe answered the embrace, which was a rare concession on her part. Had Margaret not been engrossed by her own sensations, she might have observed that the other was trembling.

"Whose voice is that?" said Margaret, all at once drawing back from the warm shoulder where she had nestled. She had grown pale again; she looked into Miss Longstaffe's face with all her nightmare terrors oppressing her.

"Somebody has come."

"You don't mean to say that Robert —"

Miss Longstaffe bowed her head.

Margaret sat as if turned to stone. Her mind was busy; but only disconnected, hurrying images presented themselves.

"Why did he come?" she gasped after a little.

Miss Longstaffe said nothing.

"How long has he been here?"

"More than an hour. The steamer got in at daylight. He came directly here. He was in the parlor

with Gladys when I came down. He wanted to wake you himself."

Margaret gave a cry and fell back prone on her bed, her whole frame shaken with sobs.

"I can't see him; I will not see him," she muttered. "He must go away. Sarah, it would kill me to see him."

"Oh, child, he is your husband still. You must see him. He will not be patient long. You had better dress and be ready."

The suggestion was a most moving threat; Margaret sprang up, looking like a hunted creature, every nerve in her body throbbing with pain and fright. Every moment she moaned under her breath. How could she bear this trouble that had come upon her like a thief in the night? Her mind perpetually reached out after some logical reason for his return. After six years' absence, to come thus! She was shaken from head to foot as the hideously cruel thing grew more palpable and actual. Had he heard that she was thinking of a divorce? Had he heard —

She sat down helpless.

"What is he like, Sarah?" she asked, with large, solemn eyes. "Is he angry, or in good spirits?"

"He seemed to me like a great boy in the highest spirits, making love to Gladys and cracking jokes."

Margaret shivered from head to foot.

"I was in hopes he was angry," she said. She sat pondering the matter. "Can't you tell him I am ill, Sarah?" she now asked. "If I could have a day to think what to do!"

"He simply would not accept the statement. He is there within a few feet of you. I expect every moment to hear him pounding on the door and demanding an entrance. He is certain that you will be charmed to see him."

Margaret made a gesture expressive of anger, rose and finished her toilet, coiling her hair in the plainest fashion, and putting on a worn and shabby gown. Every moment the presence of her husband grew a more substantial reality. She seemed to have parted from him only yesterday, and what was strange and chimerical was the memory of the intervening years. She would have liked a little preparation, a little respite to gather up her strength, to put by hope, and gladness, and freedom, before taking up this yoke again. She had no other thought. Now that he was here, she knew that she could not forsake him.

When she was quite ready to go out, Sarah brought her a cup of coffee and a roll, looking in her face, as she ate and drank, with an agitation surpassing hers. She hardly knew what sort of a crisis this was in Margaret's life. She could not be certain whether this marble calm of her face covered resolution or despair.

Margaret's hand tightened upon the other's as she rose.

"Come with me, Sarah," she said, imperatively, and the two went into the next room together.

She was eagerly expected. A young and rather handsome man was sitting before the fire in the front room, with Gladys on his knee; but the child was put aside, and he was on his feet in an instant.

"By Jove, Margaret!" was his exclamation, "you've driven me half mad keeping me waiting."

He came towards her, and they met in the middle room. He had a chiselled face, bold black eyes, and a small, feminine mouth. For a moment, as he approached her, his features were all aplay with feeling; at the sight of her unresponsive manner he paused.

"I've come back," said he. "You're glad to see me, are n't you, Margaret?"

She stopped short. She was very pale, and her lip trembled a little. She still held fast to Sarah's hand.

"You take me too much by surprise, Robert," she said. "I have not heard from you for more than twenty months. If I have not forgotten you, it is not your fault."

"But man and wife don't forget each other in a day. I know, I am willing to confess on my knees, that I have behaved badly; but the moment I had the least encouragement to come back to you —"

"Encouragement to come back to me?"

"I mean the moment I got Gladys' letter."

"Gladys' letter!"

Margaret glanced at Gladys, who stood growing white and red by turns. "Did you write to him?" she asked, with a sort of indignation gathering in her face.

The child burst into a passion of sobbing, and threw herself on the floor.

"Oh, she wrote me the dearest little letter!" said Robert. "She said she wanted me to come, and that you wanted me to come. I couldn't resist that."

He came up closer to his wife, and looked into her face with a smile which might have propitiated a woman who loved him, but was half insolent to the perceptions of one who did not. "Say you're glad to see me, Margaret," he said, coaxingly.

She gave him a sad, penetrating glance.

"I cannot say it," she returned; "at least I cannot say it yet. You had better not hurry me. Six years is an ample time for a woman to learn that her husband does not care for her."

He drew back, looking sulky and offended. "If you mean that I have not cared for you," he exclaimed, "that is a mistake of your own, with no foundation. I've always cared for you—you know I have. Every man I've talked to since I've been in Rio will tell you that I was never tired of telling about your perfections. I should have been glad enough to have you and the child come out to me,—but I had no money,—and actually a man, if he has any pride left, hates to drag the woman he adores into the mire with him. Particularly when she is as well off as you seem to be here. I knew you made money, Margaret," he added, glancing about the pretty, luxurious rooms, "but, by Jove, I didn't know you were rolling in gold."

"I probably make as much in a year as you fling away in a month," said Margaret. There was something strangely trying to her in that fluent discourse; she knew those loose, inaccurate protestations well enough. She had taken in the whole man with a single glance. He had changed in these six^{ty} years

and a half, and he had not improved. His complexion had lost its old olive clearness; he had gained flesh — or rather flabbiness, for there was a lack of muscular power about his whole face and figure. His head showed a bare spot the size of one's palm, and there were bad signs about the corners of the mouth and eyes. But she realized while she looked at him that it was the old Robert still, the man she had married. He had simply gone on deteriorating, — as he had deteriorated from the day she took his name, — with no especially accelerated pace in this long absence. His idea of faith and honor had always been to talk loudly and plausibly of his own high-mindedness; and it had ever been so entirely his instinct and habit to shirk responsibility, to commit crimes and mistakes and call them misfortunes, that it was a matter of doubt, even to those who knew him best, whether he was capable of even a glimmering of self-knowledge. His clothes were shabby and thin, too thin for the climate. She observed that a shiver ran through him as he stood, and that he looked hungrily towards the fire.

"You are not warmly enough dressed, Robert," she now said. "How absurd to come to New York in winter in such light clothes!"

"I had to come in these, or not come at all," he responded. "I had just enough money for my passage, and not a stiver more. And what a voyage it was! It ought to go to your heart, Margaret, to think of a man's crossing such seas as I encountered just for the sake of your sweet face. Such bellowing

winds, and such an infernal tossing and heaving. I was sick all the time — when I got over the nausea, my heart had palpitations, and there was a pain in the nape of my neck which almost drove me mad. I'm only half alive to-day. I need propping up. Have you got a drop of brandy?"

"No. Why should I have brandy? We are not high livers, and we are never ill. Sit down before the fire, Robert."

He willingly sank into an easy-chair, and she brought him a rug for his knees and a knitted afghan for his shoulders, and he accepted both with an ardent glance of grateful affection. He liked being ministered to by any woman; and to have Margaret on her knees stirring the fire for his comfort, putting a cushion under his feet, and finally bringing him a cup of chocolate, which she sweetened to the requisite point with a half-smiling "I remember your absurdly sweet tooth, Robert," was as agreeable an experience as he had lately encountered.

Not that Margaret had the least intention of lapsing back feebly into the thrall of old familiar custom. But Robert had always been her spoiled child while he was with her; — with an aptitude for fevers, influenzas, and all sorts of sudden aches and ills, and it had smitten her with concern to think that he was in danger of taking a terrible cold. Her mind was busy at once with the practical details of providing a wardrobe for him; he must have warm flannels, thick coat, waistcoat, trousers and surtout at once. What he could never have done for him-

self, a few shivers and a confession of abject poverty wrought for him as by magic.

Poor hurt Gladys, meanwhile, had sobbed herself into a sort of calm, and then hidden herself behind the window curtains — whence she watched the little drama going on before the fire, wholly awed by its novelty and strangeness. Her father had entered in upon her little scene before eight o'clock, taking her breath away by passionate caresses and words of endearment. He had divided his attention for half an hour between her and the furniture of the parlor. He had probed her with all sorts of questions concerning the ménage, her mamma's habits, and their acquaintances. He had asked her point-blank about there being money to pay the bills. He had clamored for breakfast, and demanded that the servants downstairs should bring him some. Miss Longstaffe had come in just as the little girl was at her wit's end. This apparition had not answered the vision the child had conjured up of an heroic father who could exorcise all the little troubles which had filled her with dread. All at once, with swift perception, she understood her mother and her acceptance of the silence and separation. She was in consternation at having set in play powers so far beyond her own control. Her former quick, sad, excusing vision of a father who had lost money and wife and child, and lived hopeless on the other side of the world, was replaced by this reality of a good-looking boyish comrade for herself. She felt sure she could love him — that is, if her mother would forgive them both. At present she

was an alien, cut off from this little heaven where they both were.

Robert, once made physically comfortable, yielded to a complacent mood, felt no jar to his susceptibilities in Margaret's manner, and recognized none of his own deficiencies in accepting anew the place he had so long left vacant. Margaret saw with some concern that he had taken a bad cold, and despatched Miss Longstaffe to buy the prodigal some warm flannels. Miss Longstaffe found herself somewhat in the mood of the eldest son, but accepted the errand without a word of disinclination. Certainly Robert Kent sitting in the most comfortable chair before the fire was too palpable and indubitable a reality in Margaret's life to be thrust aside; everything else became in comparison vague and unsubstantial.

Margaret had not known what to say to Gladys, and for a time had suffered her to crouch in the corner, apparently unheeded. In fact she felt half awestruck at the thought that it was the child who had brought about this catastrophe.

She sat down now before the fire, beside Robert, called Gladys to her, and took her on her knee. The little creature looked wistfully into her mother's face; there was something there she had never seen before. There was pain in it, a silent, scornful pain, a disdain of pain, too, and of joy as well; but yet there was a sort of gentleness in the eyes and mouth, and an answering smile met the child's eager upturned look.

"Now this would be delightful," said Robert, "if

I had not taken this infernal cold. What a climate this is! I wonder this country is inhabited. Not but what, with a big income, a man might support life in New York."

He began to tell what his likings and dislikings were, what he considered the essentials and the luxuries of life. He complained of having needed many things, during his residence in South America, which were out of reach in a rather rudimentary state of society. If a man resolutely shut his eyes to the fact that a better state of things existed, he might get on in Rio; but once allow yourself the luxury of ideals, of scruples, — so to say, a conscience, — the life there became insupportable. However, he magnanimously went on to say, there was no need of enlarging on that subject. Here he was at home again, delighted to have given up his bachelor life, and quite ready to be a model husband and father.

Gladys watched her mother's face while he was talking. Margaret's eyes looked out at him and at everything with a sort of suspicion and inquiry; there was an evident effort at surrendering herself to new impressions.

"Oh, mamma," said Gladys, "sha'n't we be very happy now? Papa is so glad to get back, and we are glad to have him; are we not, mamma?"

"Say you're glad, honestly glad, Margaret," put in Robert, laughing. "You know you're glad. In spite of all your pretty airs of reluctance, you're devilish fond of me. I'll swear you are!"

"I am stunned at present," said Margaret. "Don't

ask me anything. Let me get used to it. I should not have called you back myself. I am proud and angry and sore. But it is a great deal to me that Gladys wanted you to come. Gladys is a large part of me — the best part."

She put her arms round the child with trembling, longing, pitying tenderness. Her heart, still more than half bitter to her husband, was soft enough over Gladys. For herself, and the pain that was eating out her heart, she did not care. It did not matter — nothing mattered any more.

As the three sat grouped thus, Miss Longstaffe returned, and with her was Colonel Weir.

"Why! this is delightful!" said the colonel, expansively. "I felt, as soon as I heard the news, that I must drop in and congratulate you, Mrs. Kent, and Miss Gladys, too."

He gave the child a nod and a glance, which brought the blood to her cheek. He was bursting with a longing to say that he had been a party to the conspiracy, but waited a little to find out how the fact that he had skilfully abetted Gladys in despatching her letter would be received.

"This is Colonel Weir, Robert," said Margaret; "a kind friend of ours."

"Glad to meet you, though I am a southerner and you are an army man," said Robert. "Any friend of my wife's is my friend. Sit down, sir, sit down; I'm more than two-thirds sick. We had a voyage which turned me inside out, and I've caught the deuce of a cold on top of that."

Colonel Weir did not sit down, but stood in his favorite attitude on the hearth-rug, and looked down at the young fellow.

"It gives Mrs. Kent a chance to take care of you," said he. "A midwinter voyage from the tropics to this latitude is a dangerous thing."

"Yes; I tell my wife she ought to feel flattered that I crossed the ocean for her sake. Ocean?—one might as well call it the real original chaos. I'm not rid of the motion yet."

He went on describing the experiences of the voyage, with an exactness which left little to the imagination. Colonel Weir humored him a little, and gave sea-remembrances of his own, although he was considerably bored. He was still half proud of his achievement in helping Gladys to recall her father, but a little disconcerted by the result. He did not take to the young man, whose swagger betrayed a lack of good sense and taste. He wondered to himself how Mrs. Kent liked it, and looked at her now and then. Margaret was, however, equal to the occasion, and sat by with the smile of a Cornelia. This was her "jewel." She had no idea of disowning Robert, now that he had come. When the conversation languished a little, she took the ball in her own hands and sent it rolling anew. She wondered whether her own ear had grown more fastidious in the six years she had lived apart from Robert, or whether his talk had always been so slipshod, and his manner so loud and exaggerated.

"I am glad I happened to meet Miss Longstaffe,"

said Colonel Weir, when his half-hour was up, rather to his relief, "and that I had a chance to drop in and offer my congratulations on your husband's return, Mrs. Kent. I'll call again in a few days and see how his cold is. Shall I see you at Mrs. Charlton's ball next week?"

"I don't go to balls," said Margaret.

"Not go to balls, Margaret?" asked Robert. "Why, that's a new idea. Fond as you used to be of dancing!"

Margaret slightly shrugged her shoulders, and the visitor continued:

"Mrs. Charlton's ball is going to be a very fine affair. I hear the florists are ransacking the whole country for roses for decorations. But Charlton has no doubt told you all about it."

The colonel was on the point of bowing his adieux, when, with his hand on the door, he heard a tap on the other side, and opened it. Here was Charlton himself, and Colonel Weir thought it not only pleasantest but wisest to stay and bridge over the gulf of surprise which yawned before the young fellow.

Roger came in smiling; he had a bunch of violets in his hand.

"How are you, Weir?" said he, finding his view of the room blocked up by that rather corpulent individual.

The colonel moved aside, and disclosed to him the group at the fireside. Mrs. Kent sitting down, with Gladys leaning against her shoulder; Miss Longstaffe on the opposite side; and in the centre a young

man stretched at ease, with an afghan over his feet and legs, and a gay rug trimmed with fur about his shoulders,—apparently a sort of idol, who accepted adoration but did not move.

“Oh, Mr. Charlton,” said Margaret, rising and coming forward. “Good morning. Let me introduce you to Mr. Kent.”

Roger stood still and gazed point-blank at the new-comer. “Mr. Kent?” he then repeated, interrogatively.

“Yes,” said Robert, nonchalantly, “I’m Mr. Kent, —Robert Kent—at your service. Pardon me for not rising to be introduced, but I’m half sick, and the women are spoiling me.”

“My husband only arrived this morning,” said Margaret, turning a soft but dazzling smile upon Roger. “He has no thick clothes, so we’ve wrapped him up as well as we could in our own toggerie. Sit down, Mr. Charlton. What delicious violets!”

Roger sat down, coerced by some power he blindly recognized as invincible. It was impossible for him to resist the conviction that he was facing Mrs. Kent’s husband, but, at the same time, the fact only partially came home to him. Several detached impressions assailed him with equal force: one was that Mrs. Kent was extraordinarily handsome to-day—there was a flush on her cheek and a light in her eye that he had never seen before; and still another, that something ought to be done at once,—at once,—to hinder this foolish and calamitous arrangement, by which a bad husband, an undesirable husband,

was allowed to turn up at a moment when everything was about to be changed and fresh combinations made by which bad and undesirable husbands were to be left out in the cold.

No wonder that Roger looked pale, and that a painful rigidity was apparent in his glance, his movements,—above all, in the words he uttered, a sort of inarticulate indignation at being forced to accept what was absolutely unacceptable. He had enjoyed an exuberant sense of freedom of late; what he wanted undone and remade, the whole world was ready to set to work and undo and remake. And what horrible, ludicrous overthrow of the scheme was this? What room was there in the whole wide universe for himself and Robert Kent? What strange, uncomfortable niche in Margaret Kent's life must he cramp himself into if this man had an actual, tangible existence for her? He longed to say something clear, cutting, decisive, but he halted in the dreariest commonplace, replying vaguely and rather incoherently when addressed, and never for an instant losing his fixed stare.

Margaret held the key of the situation easily enough, recognizing the fact that she must struggle if she would live—that to be beaten in this moment was to suffer a signal and irretrievable defeat. She understood very well why Colonel Weir sat down again. She did not know at that moment whether she was glad or sorry, pleased or enraged. What she was urged to do by every instinct of womanly pride within her, was to invest her husband's return with

the propriety and dignity it did not actually possess. To do this simply and unaffectedly, was not so easy. She was constrained to over-act her part a little. If Robert spoke, she listened smiling; she propped up his stories, and supplied them with meaning. She appealed to him, she smiled into his face, until Roger Charlton's irritable, susceptible nerves were grated almost to frenzy. When Robert, — who was, in fact, worn out and growing feverish, — sank into silence, and finally dropped off into slumber, she went on talking in a subdued tone. Never in her lightest moments had she shown more ease and charm to either Weir or Charlton. And, in all she said, for accessory and background there was certain to be suggested the all-pervading happiness of married life; all her imaginings in the past, all her rapture in the present, all her hopes of the future, seemed vested in Robert, and Robert alone. She gave plenty of color to the picture, but it never passed into what could be questioned as caricature. She seemed completely the happy wife, telling, with fancy and feeling which were as fresh and new as unspoiled sculptor's clay, the unuttered and unutterable joy she felt that her husband was restored to her. At first Colonel Weir listened and half laughed. Then he forgot to laugh, and only listened. Roger apparently neither listened nor laughed, but sat looking stiff, fierce, disconsolate. Both men forgot to go away, and Margaret grew tired of her little comedy. She longed to bring the wearing scene to a climax, tried to think of some supreme touch which should invest the drama

with something to come home to the dullest perception. Chance aided her. Robert stirred in his sleep, muttered something, and reached out his hand. Margaret sprang towards him, alert.

"What is it, dearest?" she asked, and, leaning down, just touched his temple with her lips.

Roger could bear no more. He jumped up, bowed to Margaret with an angry glare, and clattered out. Colonel Weir followed presently, and overtook him fumbling at the outside door.

"Well," the colonel remarked, as they gained the street, "I did a good deed once in my life; the recording angel might as well make a note of it. I helped that little matter on;" he pointed with his thumb back to the house. "It is partly my doing that Ulysses gave up the syrens and came back."

"Yours?" shouted Roger. "What had you to do with it? Better have left him where he was."

"I knew she was dying to have him come back," said the colonel, with the comfortable expression a man wears when the still, small voice raises its note in gladness. "Any one can see with half an eye that she is in love with him. Well, he's not what I call good form; but, as men go, he's a fine-looking fellow."

"Fine-looking! He looked to me like — like —" Roger was unable to proceed. He was choked with bitterness and wrath.

"Oh, well — you're not obliged to be in love with him," said Colonel Weir. "I rejoice myself that he has come back; still, I'm afraid those afternoon teas

will not be so pleasant as they have been. We shall all be on the retired list for a time."

Roger found the colonel's twaddle as unbearable as all the rest, and he turned the first corner and left him.

CHAPTER XXII.

MISS DEVEREUX KNOWS HER OWN MIND.

THE early afternoon of the same day on which Robert Kent returned to his wife saw Dr. Walton on his way to the Devereux on his self-imposed errand of offering marriage to Elinor. This intention had come clearly into his mind on awaking that morning from a long and trance-like sleep, and he had held fast to it every moment since. He could not go on battling with such enemies as those which had assailed him yesterday, making his life a conflict and a hell. He believed that he had now lived through his strongest emotions. His thwarted passion had turned to a sort of abhorrence of Margaret and her beauty, her light laughing ways, her frank surrender of her thoughts, and all the sweetness of her varying moods. The idea of her being actually the wife of another man came across all her fairness like a foul blot. More than once the thought had crossed his mind that, after all, if she were to have a divorce, he might be free to marry her. But he put it behind him with a sort of horror. He had an ideal, and he had besides some invincible prejudices.

He determined to put all further mistakes out of his power by marrying somebody quite different.

His abstract conception had always been of purity, austerity and inflexibility in a woman; absolute self-restraint. His personal prepossessions had for a moment made him waver from this; but his experience had been so disastrous, he was glad to return to cut and dry formula. His theory was that, once deprived of necessity for choice, a man had no choice, but gratefully took up with what fate allotted him. Nothing is worse than a weak theory, except the power of putting it into practice. Miss Elinor Devereux offered Alex an altogether unique opportunity of proving his consistency to his old creed. He found the family still sitting over their luncheon, and he joined them. A close observer might have been struck by Dr. Walton's pallor and the rigidity of the muscles about his mouth: his eyes, too, seemed dilated, and had a dazzled expression. But there were no close observers at the Devereux's, and no change in his appearance challenged their attention or comment.

The old people were cordially delighted to see him, and a gleam of something resembling triumph came into Elinor's cold face as he was ushered in.

"So glad to know your uncle is better," said Mr. Devereux. "Of course it's only a respite. The enemy knocked at the door; that was all he did this time, but on the next occasion he will get in. We old fellows may be propped up a little; but we've got to die, all the same."

"Is not what you are saying slightly in bad taste, Mr. Devereux?" said his wife, with a severe air.

"Mr. Bell may live many a year yet. Look at my own dear papa; he is eighty-seven and quite hale and hearty."

"Time he was dead," grunted Mr. Devereux. "Time we were all dead. We are in the way of the younger generation. They want the universe to themselves. This is a new period, and we are the survivals of a former state of things, left over, unluckily for ourselves, to haunt a world not intended for us."

"Oh, papa," said Elinor, daintily, "let us entertain Dr. Walton with something pleasanter than accounts of our losses and disappointments."

"Oh, I don't know why I should not have my say before I go hence and be no more seen," said Mr. Devereux, with a flicker of his eyelid and a little grimace, which the visitor was perhaps to interpret humorously. "It used to be thought that a man of my age was fitted by his wisdom and experience to instruct his juniors. Of course, that fallacy is exploded; but it used also to be considered a malady of old age to be a little garrulous. Now it is the young men who are garrulous. I hardly take up a new book that does not turn out to be 'Reminiscences of a Lifetime,' or 'Thirty Years of Experience,' or something of the sort, written by some puppy half my age, about matters which belong to my middle life. I had an 'Annals of the Stage' here the other day, written by a fool whose memory actually went back to the Macready riots. Anything which happened before that was before the memory of man — quite swallowed up in the dark ages."

Alex sat with his eyes fastened on Elinor, who played with some grapes in her plate and looked indifferent. She wore a close-fitting jacket of dark velvet, over white draperies; and she had rarely appeared to better advantage.

Mrs. Devereux rose. "Will you come with us, Alex," she said, with her sweet, half-melancholy air, "or will you stay and have a glass of wine with Mr. Devereux?"

Alex rose and bowed formally.

"I wish," he said, with particular emphasis, "to speak to Mr. Devereux in his study for a moment. Then I hope" — he bowed to Elinor, with a suave smile — "that I may find you in the parlor."

This was sufficiently explicit, and it was the suitor's intention to make it so. Neither interview which he petitioned for could belong to the category of the mysterious. The mother and daughter got themselves out of the dining-room with the utmost demureness, while the father gulped down an extra glass of wine, rose with some state and shuffled along the rug to the door, which Alex was holding open for him.

"After you," said he, with much flourish.

"Oh, Mr. Devereux, I beg!" said Alex, standing up very tall and looking very distinguished; and the old gentleman passed on, entered his study, and sat down by the fire, while the young man not only closed the doors, but drew the velvet portières across them. He then came up to the mantel-piece, crossed his arms upon the end of it, and looked down.

"If you have no objection, Mr. Devereux," said he, "I am going to ask Elinor to be my wife."

"No objection in the world. In fact, nothing could please me better. You seem to me already like my own son."

"Thank you, thank you," said Alex. "I feel your approbation to be a great honor. I have known Elinor all my life. I am eight years older than she —"

"Just the right age."

"As to the question of dollars and cents, I have about three thousand a year of regular income, which I have heretofore not made much effort to increase. Now that I am taking up regular duties, — what with a practice, lectures, and —"

"Your account of your finances is entirely satisfactory," said Mr. Devereux. "Elinor has a clear hundred thousand dollars, which she will hand over to you on her wedding day. There will also be something after my death."

"I should like," said Alex, "to be married almost immediately. I should feel more secure, more settled. Besides, a medical man —"

"Should have a wife. Precisely! I'm quite with you. I suppose you'll have to wait long enough to have a lot of rubbish out from Paris, — that seems to be what marriage means to a woman nowadays."

"That need not require more than a month's delay, I trust," responded Alex. "My uncle will give me his house on Park Avenue — unless, of course, Elinor should prefer some other location, in

which case he will, so he generously affirms, buy one to suit her."

"If she doesn't like a house on Park Avenue, I'll disown her," said Mr. Devereux, whose face was beaming, and whose chest dilated with agreeable sensations. "She's a lucky girl, — that is what she is!"

"Oh! don't say that. But if a man's complete, loyal giving up of everything to his desire to make her happy can go any way —"

"My dear fellow," quavered Mr. Devereux, "go to her this instant. Don't waste that on me, although it makes my heart leap in the old fashion just to hear you. Go to her, I say; go at once." He jumped up, the tears standing in his eyes, and drew back the curtain. "Yes, go to her; and then, when she has heard all, bring her here. Her mother will be here with me."

He shook the hand of his would-be son over and over with a cordial grip, smiling tearfully in his face, and muttering phrase after phrase out of his warm feeling and good will, and finally almost pushed the suitor out of the room.

"You'll find her in the little boudoir there," he whispered. "I'm sure her mother would take her there. It's always been so in this house."

Alex entered the historic room, which had received all the proposals to daughters of the family for a century and a half, without any particular trepidation. His thoughts were quite collected, but yet he was conscious of being a little wooden and auto-

matic; once or twice to-day it seemed to him that his hold on realities was slipping. At this moment however, his perceptions were absolutely clear. Elinor sat at a little table, engaged with some lace work, over which she bent with an elaborate show of industry. There was no flutter of expectation about her, no parade of innocence or wonder; she was usefully employed, thoroughly self-possessed, and in just the mood most fitting to bind herself solemnly to a man who offered her his homage and his hand. Alex did not see Mrs. Devereux, who waited an instant, and then slipped out of the room. His eyes and his thoughts were quite engrossed by Elinor.

"Won't you look up?" he asked her.

"Please let me finish this knot," she said, smiling.

He sat down beside her. "If it is important," said he, with a short laugh, "go on with your work. I may tell you, I hope, what I have come to say, without greatly disturbing you. I always liked to see you at work, Elinor; your zest and precision and nicety in small matters seem to reveal a whole side of your nature, — that is a perfection of character of which you are probably unconscious."

"Unconscious of my perfections?" said Elinor. "That is delightful news to hear. I am afraid you have a good deal of imagination, Dr. Walton."

"I might very well have when you are concerned. I have thought about you a good deal. But I have not needed a powerful imagination, for you seem to me the realization of all my ideals."

"Oh, no, Dr. Walton; I can hardly believe that."

Alex felt himself stifled by commonplace, but could not rise above it.

"You are not going to deny me my ideals, I hope," said he.

"Oh, certainly not."

"But, with all the charm which ideals possess, ideals are not quite enough; I should like to have you something nearer and dearer to me than an ideal."

Alex felt himself tame, trivial and cold. He tried to get hold of himself and squeeze out a syllable which showed fire and passion. His sentences flowed on like a river, but his heart was horribly silent — his words seemed to echo there derisively.

"Marry me, Elinor," he now said, stretching out his hand and folding it over hers. "Be my wife. Grant me that supreme happiness."

Elinor gave up her employment, but kept her eye cast down. She had flushed slightly.

"You have known me all your life," said Alex. "Your father only a few moments ago declared that I seemed already like a son of his own." He paused, hoping for some response; but none came. He realized that it was not enough for a man to look up at a ripe plum on a tree and say "come down to me." The tree must be shaken for it to fall into his mouth, — unless, to be sure, it is over-ripe, which makes it less inviting. But how to shake the tree! How to find eloquence to plead, and passion to burn! He became conscious of a will which must be won over, — a tenacious, resolute will. Elinor had so far been

an unimportant factor in his plans. He had declared to himself that he would marry her, simply to show that he was master of his own heart and of his own life. But the most commonplace of women has her little requirements. Elinor was a serious personage, and was not likely to take an offer of marriage lightly. He must put fine purpose, determination, into his addresses. He tightened his clasp upon her hand.

"If I do not speak of love," said he, "it is because you know me so well; you have known me so long that it seems half unnecessary to put into meagre words what my whole life is to show you. No wife shall be more honored and more beloved than you. If a man can make a woman happy by putting his whole hope and feeling into the effort —"

Elinor stirred uneasily under his strong grasp.

"You hurt me," she said, in her cool, sustained manner.

"And you hurt me, you pain me to the soul," said he, her opposition acting at last like fuel to his ardor. "Have I not a right to feel that when I put my whole heart and soul at your feet —"

"If I thought, — if I could think," said Elinor, "that it was your whole heart and soul, I might be more inclined to listen. We are old friends, — all that is true. But how faithful to your old friendships have you been of late? Where have I been in your life, compared with that Mrs. Kent?"

He recoiled from her as if he had been struck a blow. She had raised her eyes, and now fixed them

on his crimson face. She looked cold, pitiless, and not a little triumphant.

"What jealous folly is that, Elinor?" said he. "Don't lessen yourself in my eyes by such allusions. When an honest man offers himself to a woman, it means all that she can require from him in the way of fealty. It means a desire for a safe and assured future." He had risen and crossed the room, but now came back and looked down at her. What his declaration to her had been powerless to effect, her allusion to what was past had easily done. His eyes had darkened, and burned with soft, melancholy fire; his firm lips had grown tense, and quivered as he spoke.

"Dear, precious, faithful friend—love me," said he. "If you could love me a little now,—if you could trust me,—and would help me,—you might have all my heart and all my devotion. I am not just now a happy man—I am in the deep waters—I hold out my hand to you—"

"I do not understand you in the least," said Elinor.

"No, you do not understand, and you do not need to. But you might love and believe in me a little. I have a need just now to say to myself, 'Elinor is to be my wife'—I should like to see you every day—plan my future life with you—"

"But it cannot be," said Elinor. "I ought not to let you go on saying all this, Dr. Walton, for I shall never marry you."

He looked at her with surprise, with a sort of resentment at such desertion.

"Why not?" he demanded.

She laughed softly.

"A lady's reasons need never be proclaimed," she said gracefully. "I cannot be your wife; that should be enough."

"It is more than enough," said he. He experienced a savage disappointment. "I don't comprehend your motive," he declared. "Is your objection to me — to my circumstances, or to any of my omissions or commissions? You used to like me, Elinor, or seem to. There was a time when everybody thought we were engaged. Again and again I have heard allusions to such a relation between us. Surely, if there were no hope for me, you ought in justice not to have awakened this belief on my side —"

"Either, Dr. Walton, you are very unreasonable or you are very unflattering," said Elinor. "You have never before asked me to marry you."

"Perhaps I am unreasonable," said Alex, "but I am bitterly disappointed, Elinor. You at least I believed I could rely on. And I suspect you have made a mistake. I think I understand your scruples." He gave her a piercing glance. "But let me tell you that when a sincere man rests on a woman as I rested on you, believing in your friendship, — feeling so used to the idea of being loved by you that I might even commit faults and still be loved by you, — she is safe in trusting him. But it is all over, is it?"

"It is over — if one can say a thing is over which never began."

"Everything is over for me," said Alex. "I believed I was going to have you for my wife. And now I shall have no wife. Ah, well! be it so. You are sure you will not relent? Suppose I were to go to the devil. Should you have a feeling of remorse?"

She shook her head smilingly.

"Oh, you will take care not to give me occasion for remorse, Dr. Walton. I trust your magnanimity."

"I'm not so sure that you may. A romantic person would have many reproaches to utter. But I am only a half romantic person, and I am afraid of boring you."

"But sit down and talk of something else."

"Not to-day. I will go back to my uncle's. Your father will be surprised that I do not go into his room again. But perhaps you will make my excuses."

"Oh, yes, and to mamma too."

Alex bowed low, turned and left the room. He was taking his hat and greatcoat from the servant in the hall when Mr. Devereux, who was dying of impatience, heard the stir, and, putting his head out his door to listen, caught sight of the disappointed suitor.

"What! going, Alex?" he said. "Why, what in world does this mean?"

"I left my excuses with Miss Devereux," Alex said dryly, stamping his feet into his rubber overshoes.

"But, what—come now,—how—just step in here a moment,—that's a good fellow."

Alex obeyed him, went into the study, shut the door and leaned against it.

"She won't have me," said he.

"Not have you? She's crazy! Not have you? Why you must have misunderstood her."

"No; what she said was excellently plain. She refused me, evidently does not care a button for me."

"She's been ready to jump down your throat these five years."

"No; we have been in error. She does not even like me. I don't believe a man was ever treated with more complete indifference."

The color rose in Mr. Devereux's face. "It is this d—d self-confident, spoiled, egotistical modern age," said he. "They are all self-willed asses,—all of them,—my daughter amongst 'em. I thought she was my child, and her mother's. But, d—it, she, the *enfant du siècle*, as they call it—I disown her—I wash my hands of her!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

ULYSSES AT HOME AGAIN.

ONE day towards the middle of February, Mrs. Kent happened to be alone, when a visitor arrived whom she had thought of for weeks now with a curious feeling of sorrowing wonder and disappointment. A great change had swept over her little world since Robert came home to her; but Mr. Bell's friendship, she could not help feeling, ought to have survived the deluge. She was glad to see him without even Gladys at her side. She did not keep him waiting an instant; but ran into the parlor from her own room, with an eagerness which was a striking contrast to her usual listlessness in these days. Once in sight of him, she paused and looked at him with astonishment; and he, too, regarded her in silence, his heart chilled by the expression of her face.

"Dear Mr. Bell," she faltered, tears rushing to her eyes, "you look ill. You look far more fragile than you did the day I saw you sick with that terrible cold."

"I have not got my strength yet," said he. "Perhaps I never may. I am old, you know; and it depends much on circumstances how many years one can carry after the three score and ten."

He took a step nearer to her, and clasped both her hands between his. "Is this really my little Margaret?" he asked.

"Am I so changed?"

He nodded. There was, indeed, a striking alteration in Margaret; the roundness of her face had quite departed, and an absolute pallor had replaced the old peach-like coloring; her eyes seemed larger and more brilliant; her lips folded over each other with more decision. Her whole figure showed new strength and dignity; but it expressed at the same time a certain scorn, while her face had gathered some imperiousness about the brows and around the corners of the mouth. She had gained beauty instead of losing it; but one who loved her like Mr. Bell could only tremble at the sight of these new forces suddenly roused in her.

"A great deal has happened of late," said Margaret. "I feel as if I were changed. Still, I look at myself in the glass, and am amazed to see that I am just the same — to my own eyes, at least."

"You are not looking well," said Mr. Bell. "It hurts me to see these traces of suffering. What has made you suffer so? Is *he* unkind to you?"

"Robert? No; Robert is good-nature itself. I have no right to look as if he made me suffer. He is easily satisfied; he is immensely proud of Gladys, and New York is a paradise to him. I ought to say to you that Robert is not to be blamed either for staying away or for coming home. He returned one morning early, sat down before the fire, and for three weeks

did not go out. He had taken a cold which almost killed him, with an incessant cough. By the time I had nursed him through that, I had forgotten that he had ever been away."

She said this in a gentle, monotonous voice, and they looked in each other's eyes all the time. He gave a little groan as she ceased speaking.

"A man, perhaps, may shake off the past," she added, answering his unuttered thought; "but for a woman it is impossible. Where she has once taken root, there she must stay, or else lose her life and her womanhood altogether."

"But you are not happy." Mr. Bell said this with a sort of fierceness.

"Happy? Was I ever happy? Yes, with you, dear Mr. Bell, I fancy I used to be happy now and then. But it was not often. I helped myself with illusions. I was always running after something, looking forward to something. I had to keep up. I was always a little afraid to stop what I was doing, and go to thinking."

"You always seemed full of radiance. I should have said you were the happiest person in the world."

"I was so young. It is so easy to seem happy when one is young. Did I ever tell you about Gladys when she was a little thing, and for the first time was invited to a party. We lived high up in a boarding-house, and had a dull experience of it; and the thought of this party was delightful to her,—she talked incessantly of it for a week before the

day came. But when the day came, it brought a storm which swept everything away — the street was like a river. It rained harder and harder until the hour, and I said to her, 'You must give it all up, Gladys — you cannot go. Now be brave, don't cry!' Her little lip went down, but she struggled for composure, looking in my face all the time; then she said, 'Well, mamma, — perhaps there'll be a rainbow, or *some* fun.' That problematic rainbow has supported me through many a weary hour."

"How is little Gladys?" The two had sat down before the fire now. Mr. Bell realized every moment more and more that the Margaret who addressed him was not the woman he had hitherto known.

"She will be in presently. Miss Longstaffe took her out to buy a pair of boots. I no longer go out myself. I seem to have lost all inclination for the fresh air. It is a comfort to me to see the snow come down, and to feel that we are buried beneath snowdrifts. Now, we have said enough about me and my affairs; tell me about yourself."

"There is nothing to tell except that I sail for the Mediterranean the day after to-morrow; I shall go to Leghorn first — and stay as long as I like it."

"I heard that you were going. In fact, I saw in the paper that your passage was taken a fortnight ago, and for several days I supposed that you were already gone. I felt very badly. It seemed an unnecessary cruelty of fate that I should have been obliged to lose you without one good-bye."

He looked at her, benumbed with despair and a sort of rage. What was he to say? What was he to do? There had been a play of light about her face when she first entered, which had vanished now.

"I should come to you if I were alive. I did think of sailing at that time, but Alex, my nephew, has been very ill. He is going with me, you know."

She looked at him with a sudden dilation of her eyes.

"No, I did not know. You say he has been ill. Is he better?"

"Yes, — about well now."

"What was the matter?"

"One can hardly tell. Brigham, who attended him, said he had been working too hard — at his microscope, I dare say. These young fellows have not our constitutions."

"And he is going with you! That is pleasant for you both."

"Nothing is pleasant for me, Margaret." Mr. Bell spoke eagerly, with a little spot of color coming to both cheeks. "I shall try to fasten my attention upon trifles, and keep some ray of light on them, that I may not be lost in the thick darkness. No happiness remains for me, — none. It would be something to me if you were happy — but you are miserable."

"No, no, no," cried Margaret, "I am not miserable."

"I see you in the future losing all faith and belief in yourself, — you say you have forgotten all about

these six years your husband has been away. I seem to know what that means, — that you have given up."

"No, — I have not given up."

"Don't make a poor use of this trouble. Don't force me to go abroad with the burning agony upon my soul that I leave you worse than desolate. It seems to me you have set up a wall between yourself and me."

She looked at him imploringly.

"I don't mean to do that," she whispered. "But don't you see —" she broke off, and the tears rushed to her eyes. He groaned from the bottom of his heart.

"It is all or nothing," she went on, with more composure. "I shall do very well after a time. But, in spite of what I said, — six years is a long time. The soul makes a great growth; and to have to cut it down — limit it — adjust it —" She broke off again.

"I shall get used to it," she said. "Don't think of me as unhappy. I should like to have you see Robert. He is a pleasant fellow. He knows little or nothing of books or of things I have got into the way of holding precious — but —"

She turned, for the door was opening. It was Miss Longstaffe and Gladys who were coming in. The child went up to her mother first, without a glance at Mr. Bell, and looked into her face wofully at the signs of tears. She took the white, nerveless hands lying on her lap, and kissed them dumbly — then,

growing a little bolder, laid her cheek against that marble white one.

"You do not see Mr. Bell, dear," said Margaret. "And he has come to say good-bye. He is going to sail away to a beautiful summer-land to-morrow."

Mr. Bell drew Gladys to his knees and began talking to her. Miss Longstaffe sat down opposite and watched the group, which she had often seen before in just the same attitudes and just the same place, but was never to see again. It was the first time for weeks now that what was usual and familiar had been going on in these bright little rooms. Everything had been altered—and for the worse, Miss Longstaffe could not help thinking. Once she had broached the subject of separating herself from the little ménage, but Margaret's glance of reproach and silent clutch of the hand had made her give up all idea of taking such a step. This little scene was an agreeable suggestion that, after all, better times might be returning. She had looked at Margaret with a painful dread ever since Robert came home. Her creed was that people must accept their lives, and, once accepting them, were certain to find answers to the problems which vexed them. But was Margaret likely to find anything save a dull, despairing acceptance of hers? It was certainly right for Robert to come home, and for husband and wife to live together; only there was a wrong in it somehow. Miss Longstaffe was conscious in these days of a dull, smouldering resentment against things in general, and an intense irritation at things in particular.

But here was Mr. Bell talking to Gladys in just his old way; and Margaret dropped a word now and then, with her tragic mood lifted for the moment. Mrs. Townsend came in to pay an afternoon visit, and expressed a pretty amazement to find everything going on in much the old fashion.

"I hear that Ulysses has come back, dear Margaret," she said, "and I wanted to congratulate you. I am told he is a very handsome young man, and that your old friends can hardly get a word with you. But how people do gossip; for here is Mr. Bell come in to take four o'clock tea, just as he used to do. Do I intrude? Or may I sit down and join you?"

"Sit down," said Margaret; "Miss Longstaffe shall make us some tea. I had quite forgotten hospitable duties; and I dare say, Mrs. Townsend, that Mr. Kent may come in, and you shall ask him yourself about his Odyssey."

"Who knew him when he came back?" demanded Mrs. Townsend, with her gay air. "Did his faithful dog recognize him, or did you give him a trial at bow and arrows, Margaret?"

"I knew him," said Gladys, indignantly. "Why do you ask mamma such questions, Mrs. Townsend? It is as if it were something strange that my papa should come back."

"Hush, dear!" said Margaret, laughing. "You see, Lilly, that Gladys is not old enough to understand your witty allusions. And she resents anybody's finding fault with her beloved papa."

"That is so sweet of her," Mrs. Townsend an-

swered softly. "Dear Mr. Bell, I hear that you are to sail soon. I do hope Italy may quite restore you. It is a charming idea to leave this climate of ice and snow for a land of flowers."

"Flowers are not likely to bloom for me. But we old people have a fancy, which the doctors encourage, that we may get rid of the mechanical rotation of our dull lives by such changes and upheavals."

"And your nephew goes with you, I hear. A little bird told me that the engagement to Miss Devereux was off."

"They were never engaged."

"Is that so? I thought she jilted him."

"No; tell the story just as it is — Miss Devereux refused my nephew."

"Is it possible? How could any woman refuse so delightful a man? But the good fortune of a girl like Elinor Devereux is something beyond not only my experience but my imagination." Mrs. Townsend, with her pretty head on one side, looked roguishly at Mrs. Kent. "Margaret, dear," said she, "I hope you did not spoil that match. I remember now that I myself told Mrs. Devereux and her daughter about finding a certain gentleman here. You remember, do you not? I did not intend to do any harm; but when I mentioned the fact to those ladies, it seemed to make a distinct impression."

"I really don't understand you," said Margaret. "I suppose you have seen many gentlemen here. Do you refer to Dr. Walton? And did you take the trouble to carry stories about him, Mrs. Townsend?"

It shows certainly your supreme respect for the human species, since no matter concerning a man or woman is too insignificant for you to busy yourself about."

Mrs. Townsend flushed slightly.

"I did not see you at Mrs. Charlton's ball, Margaret," she now said. .

"No, you will not see me in many gay resorts henceforth."

"Does not your husband like you to go out? Is he jealous? How delightful it must be to come home and have a pretty young wife to look after! Always keep him a little jealous, Margaret. Roger Charlton has gone to Europe, I know; and Tom Updegraeff is in New Orleans. So far as your old admirers are concerned, New York is rapidly becoming depopulated. Now, Mr. Bell is going."

At this moment the handle of the door turned, and everybody looked to see who was entering. A young man stood there with half-bright, half-dull eyes, and a smile on his lips. Margaret started to her feet.

"Oh, Robert, is that you?" she said. She looked at him coldly. It was evident that the foolish fellow had been drinking freely.

"Oh, yes; it's I," he said, in his easy way. "I saw no sign of 'No Admittance' on the door, so I bolted in. Taking tea, are you?—'the cup that cheers, but not inebriates.' For my part, I prefer the cup which —"

"Robert, here are some friends of mine. Mrs.

Townsend, let me introduce Mr. Kent. Mr. Bell, this is my husband."

Margaret stood with a grand air, and made her introductions in her clearest voice. Robert bowed with a little too much flourish, saying to himself that he must allow nobody to suspect that he was not quite the thing. Mr. Bell looked him in the face with a straight, cutting glance, which forced him to drop his eyes sheepishly and draw away his hand as soon as he could. He was glad to turn to Mrs. Townsend, who smiled at him winningly, and who, being only a woman, of course would not find him out.

"I was just about taking leave," she said; "but as an old friend of your wife's, I have naturally an irresistible desire to see you."

"An irresistible desire to see me?" said Robert, with a maudlin laugh. "Well, here I am."

He sat down in an easy-chair on casters which ran more freely than he had counted on, and as he made this speech a slight impetus sent his chair full-tilt up to Mrs. Townsend's, so that he had the look of falling against her.

"How do you like me now you do see me?" he said, with what he intended to be graceful banter.

"That I reserve for your wife's ear. What I wish to do is to offer my felicitations upon your happy return. I was just saying that it must be very pleasant for you to come back and find a pretty young wife to look after."

"Oh, yes; and quite time I did, no doubt. Now that I'm back, I wonder a thousand times a day how

I could have stayed away so long. She is too pretty and too young to be left alone. I sha'n't go away again."

"I hope not, I'm sure."

"Oh, no; I'm settled down now for life. I married pretty young—before I had grown domestic. But family life is the thing. I shall get something to do here in New York, and we shall go on like a house afire. Nobody will have any right to complain of me hereafter. The only thing necessary to do is to make money."

"So I find," said Mrs. Townsend, who had rarely been more diverted than by this spectacle of the foolish young fellow, flushed with wine, puffed out with importance, saying everything with a solemn air, all the while adorning and partly interpreting his speech with nods and winks. "Life in New York is a costly and a complicated business. I find that I have to resign all but a few things. But Margaret loves luxury."

"Don't she, though? I looked round in astonishment when I came in and saw these rooms. She had written me about her unproductive trade and her necessity for a pinching economy. Often I had thought that I ought to be sending her money."

"Margaret has a pen that can coin gold."

"That's what I tell her," declared Robert, almost shouting in his elation. "Well, well, we'll see, we'll see."

He saw, by Mrs. Townsend's transfer of attention to the other side of the room, that something was

taking place, and turned. Mr. Bell was making his adieux, almost silently, with a fixed white face.

"Who is that solemn old cove?" Robert asked, in what he meant to be a whisper, but was cruelly audible.

Mr. Bell did not give him even a parting glance. He did not look into Margaret's eyes. He longed to escape from being a witness of her humiliation.

Even Mrs. Townsend by this time wanted a mantle drawn over the young man's infirmities, and she kissed Margaret and Gladys and went away.

"That's an infernally pretty woman, Margaret," Robert remarked, with a man-of-the-world air. "Who is she?"

"She is my worst enemy," replied Margaret. "She is a woman who before this time to-morrow will have told everybody who ever heard of me, that my husband has come home, that he is a drunkard, that he is besides a foolish babbler, prattling in his cups of what a gentleman, what even the lowest boor who had any manly fibre, would hold his tongue about."

Robert gazed at her aghast.

"Do you mean me?" he said, thickly. "Why, I'm a gentleman. I'm always a gentleman, I am. Perhaps I took a glass, — but — I didn't expect to see anybody here. If a man can't come home when he is not quite himself, where can he go?"

He continued to stare in her face until she turned away with an imperious, angry gesture.

"Henceforth, always come home," she said, in a clear, deliberate tone. "Nobody else shall come

here. I turn friendship, society, luxury, even comfort, out of doors. This is the fourth time now you have returned in this condition, and at last I give up — I give up everything. I succumb; why should I struggle?"

Robert had not ceased to look at her, although she had turned away. Her meaning reached even his sluggish intellect.

"You speak," said he, half sobered, "as if you scorned me."

"Scorn you?" she repeated, looking at him with a melancholy glance. "I do scorn you."

He tried to make a brave stand, but her words rankled too deep. He felt insulted and humiliated, and he burned, too, with a sense of her injustice.

"She scorns me," he exclaimed, as if appealing to some higher tribunal. "She scorns me." Enamoured of the phrase, he repeated it, again and again, then went up to her and put his hand upon her arm.

"Dyemeantusay —" he began, his words all run together, and his face crimson.

She shook him off. "Don't make me loathe you," she said, with a shudder.

His features twitched nervously, his lips trembled.

"You'll see — you'll see," he said, in impotent rage, turned in an instant, and with a drunken step went out and down the stairs. In another instant they heard the street door bang.

Margaret had flung herself face downwards on the lounge, and was sobbing violently; while Miss Longstaffe and Gladys gazed at her, stricken, feeling as

if all their comfort had come to an end. Each had buoyed herself up with some illusions. Miss Longstaffe had thought again and again, "Margaret is bearing it very well. She likes anything she can exert herself about, and the young man gives her a clear object in life." While little Gladys had begun to flatter her guilty, sore little heart, that writing the letter, — which brought such a good-looking, good-natured papa home, — had not, after all, been such a wicked thing. But here was the reality, with all the rose-colored illusions stripped off, — and a grisly skeleton reality it was. The wife had shown her sense of wrong and outrage only too plainly. Under her outward calmness all this time had developed keen and bitter feeling, and in this final outburst she had expended her accumulated rage and pent-up impatience; her crushed hopes, her ever vivid and brilliant dreams, had asserted their vitality above the necessity she had lately imposed upon herself of humoring low standards, and petty vices, and confirmed habits of self-indulgence. And, unluckily, anyone who knew Robert knew at once that he must be humored a little, have his vanity pampered, and things made comfortable for him. He could sleep ten hours a day, eat with a capital appetite, never read a printed line except the details in the newspapers to which the flaming captions introduced him. The rest of the time he wanted to be diverted, flattered, to play games, and see people. He delighted in the theatre, and any performance behind the footlights captivated him. As Margaret told him, this was the

fourth time he had come home slightly intoxicated. It was an excess he excused readily enough in himself, and which seemed to have no particular effect upon him except to make him a little more puffed up with self-importance, his laugh a little more vacant and empty, and his words more pointless. Now he had been sent out burning with a desire to avenge himself for a slight, and Heaven only knew how he would come home.

Miss Longstaffe went up to Margaret, and put her hand on her shoulder.

"My dear," she said, "you must not. You have strength, you have self-control; and you need to use them both."

Margaret sat upright, showing her tear-stained face.

"I meant to keep myself behind bolt and bar," she murmured hopelessly, "but the horror of it all came on me. To think that I—I, Margaret Kent, who have seen such visions and dreamed such dreams,—have come to this!"

"I know it is hard,—but the most difficult position imposes duties. No human being has a right to humiliate another."

"Am not I humiliated every day, every hour? What has Robert done since he came back except to make me feel that I must give up pride, give up ambition, give up almost self-respect, in order to live with him peaceably. Everybody and everything humiliates me. You heard that woman's ill-natured jests and allusions. You saw her triumph over me."

"But what did that matter? What is Mrs. Townsend to you?"

"What is anybody or anything to me? What have I to keep up? How can I help yielding in such a contest with fate? I feel alone — alone — alone — I am too far off for anyone to reach me. Nobody can help me. Nobody can do me any good."

The tragic despair of her face and voice pierced to the very heart of little Gladys, who had stood looking on, but who now with a cry ran up to her mother, and encircled her with her tender arms.

"I am here, mamma," she cried, "I am here. Don't forget me."

Margaret neither met nor repulsed the ardent embrace.

"I am all alone on an island," she said. "I am girt about by a wide sea. You cannot reach over it. Your little arms are too short."

Gladys shuddered and drew back. There was a long silence. Then Miss Longstaffe remarked dryly,

"You are so young that you half enjoy your own despair. I can understand that you should nourish some distrust of all the world. I don't wish to be intolerably officious, so I have kept silence. But believe one thing: where you are, I am there also, — if thirsting in the desert, I, too, thirst and die in the desert; if where the waters of healing bubble up, I, too, am refreshed and healed."

Margaret looked up into Miss Longstaffe's grim, yellow face, and her rebellious heart softened.

"Dear, faithful friend," she said, stretching out her hand. "Good Sarah! Blessed Sarah! I need never die of loneliness while you are near. And it is an unspeakable comfort all the time, in spite of my complaints, that you know everything. To you I don't have to acknowledge myself maimed and wounded, for you know just what blows have crippled me. But to have to stretch out one's hand like a beggar to strangers, demanding their sympathy — that I cannot do. The worst of all is to find myself ridiculous in the eyes of the world, laughed at, commented upon, — that is the hardest pang to bear."

"Oh, you are too proud."

"I wonder what I am proud about. I set my teeth and clench my hands to think of my folly, my vanity, my wickedness. All the time I see myself in the various phases of my experience always doing the utmost I can to ruin my own life. I alone am guilty — I am punished as I deserve. And yet sometimes I have felt that I was the most fortunate woman on earth. Do you remember how in old days we would sit here, we three, and the fire would burn, and the lamps would glow, and we would talk together? I missed nothing then. And that sunset in Thun last summer! Cannot you recall how the crimson blazed forth and bathed everything in wonderful color, and I turned from the glowing heavens and the magically lit mountains, and put my arms about you? Every lofty, beautiful and worthy hope drew me upwards at that moment — I stood at the

very gates of heaven. Life seemed a very grand thing."

"We have our grand moments—and our poor ones, too."

"I don't like poor moments. I don't like pain,— I don't like misery,— I don't like patience and suspense. A trouble that I can thrust aside, conjure, or run away from, *that* may be borne; not one that is perpetually hushing our happiness to sleep at night and meeting one at waking,— that you can't get rid of,— that, when you go to the end of the earth to escape, pops up its head and says, 'Here I am.' I hate impotent thinking and doing and living."

Margaret had asserted herself again. She could not long be utterly cast down. She now said, with some whim,

"Do you remember the poor old machine Carlyle tells about, which went whirring and beating its arms, crying, 'Once I was hap—hap—happy,—now I am *meeserable*.' That's I—that's I to the very life."

She crossed the room and looked at the clock.

"We must have dinner without waiting for Robert," she said. But dinner was rather a dreary meal. The empty place seemed to chill them all; there was a threat in the silence and vacancy.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A LAST LOOK.

THERE would be no use in giving the scene which followed when Robert finally came home. He was blustering and violent, and Margaret was indifferent and cold. He awoke next morning very much ashamed of himself, and did his best to please his wife all that day, displaying an alacrity in his performance of any little service he could proffer, which ought to have propitiated her. Margaret was not, however, in a responsive mood. She had gone through a great deal of emotion of late, and to-day experienced an insufferable weariness and ennui. She had some writing to do, which became, in her present mood, a serious effort, and she was almost glad when Robert said he would go out.

"Don't be afraid," said he, looking at her deprecatingly; "I won't touch a drop."

She said nothing, only looked at him indifferently.

"Won't you trust me?" he asked. "Do you utterly disbelieve in me?"

"I neither trust nor mistrust, believe nor disbelieve; I simply remember."

"Oh, come now, Margaret. You're not so strait-

laced as all that. I haven't been living among Puritans. Forgive me my sins and trust me to do better."

"Oh, very well." He was putting on his well-fitting surtout, bought with her money, like the coat on his back and the veriest trifle which went to clothe him from head to foot; and after he was ready to go out, continued to look at her with a soft, bright smile. "I want to ask something," said he, "but I'm half afraid and half ashamed to."

"Don't be afraid of me. I certainly seem to myself a very insignificant person."

"I want a little money."

"I have only five dollars."

"You don't need it this afternoon, do you?"

"Perhaps not."

"And to-morrow you said you should get thirty for those slips of paper you're scrawling over. I wish I could make money like that."

"Why do you not get some occupation?"

"I might better ask why, with all your acquaintance with New York big-wigs, you cannot secure me some good place. That Mr. Bell now,—he might have given me a lift."

"Mr. Bell sails for Europe to-morrow. Don't make a mistake. I can do nothing for you. I have no real friends. You will have to find something for yourself."

"Well, I'm trying to do so. I spend all my time looking for a clerkship,—anything. I'm an unlucky fellow. It's always been hard times with me. The

moment I ever undertook any business or any speculation, the bottom fell out."

"Somebody said once that if he had gone into the business of a hatter, people would have been born without heads."

"That's my case precisely. Well, how about that five dollars?"

Margaret took the bill out of her purse and gave it to him, lifting her eyebrows slightly as she did so. His object attained, Robert lost no time in more words, but left the house, and did not return until towards midnight. He seemed then in great spirits, was so excited he could not sleep, tossed about half the night, and only towards dawn sank into a sound slumber, which lasted until long after Margaret had finished her writing, made the manuscript up into a package, dressed herself, and gone out to carry it herself to the magazine office. She had not been out of the house for a week or more, and the brilliance of the winter's day almost startled her. The sunlight was dazzling; the sky, a luminous azure. Margaret's spirits had been too long quenched not to avail themselves of the least chance of a rebound.

"After all," she said to herself, looking up, with a sudden exaltation of feeling, "so long as one has a little sky above one, life may be lived somehow."

She thought of Robert with less impatience than usual, with less of her usual baleful consciousness of superiority. He would presently find some occupation and settle down to work, and she could go on making her own career. If she could not be happy,

she could at least be busy and useful; all she really cared for was a chance to sit down quietly and write out what she felt and thought.

All this had flashed through her mind before she had gone ten steps from the house. Then, suddenly, she stopped short as if confronted by a spectre. A man was standing leaning against a tree, and watching her advance. When she faltered he made a step forward, and they met face to face.

"Dr. Walton," she murmured, with an overwhelming sensation of shyness, terror, and doubt. "Is it really you? How ill you look!"

"I have been ill," said Alex, and, indeed, the loss of color in his face, the deepened lines, the enlarged orbits of the eyes, and the heightened delicacy of forehead and temples, seemed to show the ravages of a long sickness.

Timidly Margaret extended her hand.

"I am so sorry," she whispered.

He did not take her hand. "Sorry?" he repeated. "You look like an image of joy. When angels come down from heaven, radiant with the joy and brightness of their perfect happiness, they must look exactly as you looked before you saw me."

She gazed at him in shocked surprise.

"My uncle was lamenting your changed looks," pursued Alex; "and it cut me to the heart to go away and leave you — perhaps suffering. I wanted to see you just once. I knew not how to contrive it. But destiny had her eye upon me. It was to be. I needed to be cured of a certain infatuation. Well, I

am cured! — that is, unless I am wholly an irrational being. To preserve any further belief in you, after what I now discover, would be to be insensible to experience — hopelessly doomed to illusions.”

There was something terrible to her in his look and his manner. He suffered before her eyes; she felt the shock and shudder of his misery as keenly as if he had uttered groans and cries.

“I am glad your husband has come back,” he went on to say, growing every moment more vehement, yet all the time governing himself by a more evident effort. “I wanted everything finished and dead between us. I am glad you are happy; glad from the bottom of my heart. If I believed you likely to suffer, it might cause me some fluctuations of mind.”

They looked at each other, both pallid as ghosts.

“God forbid that I should seek to extenuate — to excuse anything,” said Margaret, “but — you seem never quite to have understood —” She could not go on; her agitation grew.

“One thing seemed excellently clear to me,” said he, in an icy tone, “and that was that you were to be my wife. And now you are not my wife, — far from it, the wife of another man. And the glance of your eyes, the touch of your hand, all that is to be forgotten. Be it so. Good-bye, Mrs. Kent. You don’t know what this experience has been to me, and God forbid that you ever should!”

“Oh! Dr. Walton, listen a moment! Of course, our roads must divide, but —”

“Divide? Yes, I should think so. Of course, I

ought to be grateful for the little time when they ran together. Every dog has his day—I had mine.”

“Oh! you are excited. You —”

“Oh! tranquillize yourself. I am not in the least degree excited. I may, in the past, have been a little carried away, but now I am quite restored to my reason—quit of all my follies. I am going away; we shall meet no more —”

“If I have done wrong —” began Margaret; but he smiled ironically.

“Done wrong? Done wrong?” he repeated. He waved his hand and passed on. “Good-bye, Mrs. Kent,” he said, as he looked back a moment.

Somebody passed at the moment; and Margaret also moved on, walking rapidly towards Broadway. Once on that busy thoroughfare, she looked up and down vacantly, wondering where she was and what her object could have been in coming out. Her heart throbbed painfully, and there were strange roarings in her ears. Her consciousness of the actual world seemed lost, and she struggled to regain it. What had just passed was so sudden and so painful that it was hard to believe in it,—except that she felt herself tingling from head to foot, as if from physical blows.

“He will never forgive me, never!” she said to herself, with a firm clutch at the heart. “And yet he is the only one whose duty it is to forgive utterly and freely.”

She recalled what her errand was, and went on rapidly down Broadway.

CHAPTER XXV.

A FOOL AND HIS MONEY.

"PAPA," said Gladys to her father one morning, "I wish you would not take mamma's money."

Robert looked at Gladys lazily. He was planning to get twenty dollars out of Margaret that day, and the child's words seemed to him like clairvoyance.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Mamma has to work very hard. She and cousin Sarah are not rich. Oh dear, no,—they are not rich at all. And they have to pay for these rooms, and for all we eat and for all the clothes we wear. No, papa, please do not ask mamma for any more money. I would rather give you mine."

"Yours? How much have you got?"

"Oh, a good deal. Ever so many gold pieces."

"Gold pieces? You mean nickel cents."

"Oh, no; gold pieces, real gold. One is quite big."

"Oh, nonsense; you're joking. I don't believe in your gold pieces. Let me see them."

Gladys went to the cabinet, unlocked a door, and took out a little metal safe with a hole in the top. She felt a little sad and reluctant in doing this; but, whatever happened, she told herself, stiffening her

lip to make her heart brave, it was her own money, nobody else's, — her mother had always told her so.

Robert took the box eagerly, and weighed it in his hand with a critical air. "It feels heavy as gold, or lead," said he, with his easy laugh. "How do you get at the mysterious treasure?"

"It unscrews at the bottom," answered Gladys, her features slightly quivering.

"There is a screw-driver in that sewing-machine. I saw it yesterday. Go bring it."

Gladys obeyed him, and in five minutes he was greedily counting out the silver and gold.

"Sixty dollars," said he. "I don't think much of your love for your father and mother, Gladys, if, when you know that they are bothered about money matters, you hide away all this wealth and do nothing for them."

Gladys was cut to the quick. "Ever and ever so many times," she cried, "I have put it in mamma's lap, and said 'please use it,' 'Oh, I would love so much to have you use it;' but she would not. And if you want it, papa, take it, take it all. It is not mine, but it is mamma's or yours to do just what you like with."

She stood up full of a fierce indignation, her fine features set like marble.

Robert was fingering the money, feeling a trifle shame-faced before the little princess-like creature.

"Of course," said he, "if I take it, it is a mere loan, which I will soon repay. Not only repay, but put in two gold pieces for each one that I take out.

I shall soon have money — plenty of money. This is a mere temporary inconvenience. It would be too bad to take it unless in the course of a week, — perhaps a day, — I could fill up the little bank again. But I know you love your father, Gladys. I haven't forgotten your letter yet. So I embrace you for the good thought, and accept your kind impulse."

He went on talking while he brought his hat and overcoat and put them on, a little confused and hasty, and not once meeting the child's splendid eyes.

"You are in a great hurry to get away," she said with a peculiar intonation.

"I have very particular business," answered Robert. He stooped and kissed her cheek, perhaps not observing that she did not offer her lips. He opened the door, shut it behind him, then turned back and said with a forced laugh, "Perhaps, Gladys, you'd better not tell mamma. That is, not until I have put it all back, and as much again."

"I shall not tell mamma," the child said, coldly, but with a swelling heart, which took relief in sobs the moment he had left the room.

It was all hard for Gladys to bear, and her soul felt the yoke heavily, heavily. The problem was hopeless to her. Here was her mamma saying that she spent most of her time with her head between her two hands, unable to squeeze out a single idea, — that she would soon be unable to make any money at all, — while her papa took every dollar in the house and went out each day full-handed, only to

come back empty and eager for more. It had been a comfort to her that she had this little treasure safely stored up against some evil day. It had come to her in all sorts of ways. Mr. Bell had given the double eagle, and each of the smaller pieces recalled some happy time: she knew them, every one; and it had been her habit once a year to bring them forth, and make, as it were, a rosary of them, telling them over with remembrances, longings, and prayers. Now they were gone, and it was her own fault. Everything was her own fault, she told herself with sobs and tears. She had sent for her father, and here he was, like a cruel ogre in a book, eating up everything. The poor little heart was crushed by a burden too heavy for it, and the little brain was bewildered by the intricacy of the problem offered to it. She hardly knew what petitions to put in her prayers, all the relations of her life seemed so strangely distorted. She could at least venture to implore that her father might bring back her money and restore it, as he had promised, twofold.

Somebody has said that all prayers beg that two and two may not make four. Gladys' was for the impossible, since her gold pieces had inexorably gone the way of the rest of Robert's money, and could not come back unless the wheel of fortune should turn itself completely round. He was moody and spiritless for a few days, then brightened up and began to proffer delicate attentions to Miss Longstaffe, waiting on her at table, passing salt and pressing mustard upon her with wonderful gallantry.

Nature had not denied him attractiveness, and he did not mistrust his power to captivate a grim, faded woman who had never, in all probability, been approached by so handsome a young man. He asked her to make a sketch of him, and sat for hours in her studio, pouring out the story of his life. She humored him up to a certain point by listening, working all the time at his chiselled features, and giving him the pose he liked, half sentimental and half bold, like a Romeo.

"He is a poor creature," she said to herself a dozen times a day, but Robert believed that she was half enamoured of him.

"Don't you call that a very good-looking fellow?" he said one morning, coming into the atelier and looking over her shoulder as she was putting a few finishing touches to the portrait; it was to go to an exhibition of pictures on the morrow.

"Good-looking! Quite the reverse," said Miss Longstaffe.

"Come, now, you're joking. You drop into the gallery when the exhibition opens, and see if there is not always a cluster of women about it. Nobody ever denied that I was handsome."

"You said good-looking. Handsome, they say, is as handsome does, — but it is an empty adjective to me. Anything with a prepossessing outside may be handsome. I don't call you good-looking."

"But not bad-looking, surely?" He found her strictures amusing, and sat down before her, looking like a naughty little boy who liked his naughtiness.

"You look to me rather bad. Honestly, I don't believe in you."

"Don't you, now? I assure you, you may. Of course you see me at a disadvantage. I am earning no money—I am living on women. I am indolent, or seem so at least. My wife treats me indifferently, if not contemptuously. It is difficult for a man to assert himself under such circumstances. But give me a chance and I will surprise you."

"What kind of a chance?" She looked at him intently.

"Get me something to do."

"What can you do?"

He laughed. "Why, anything."

"That is vague. Could you teach school, for example?"

"Well, hardly. Although I dare say, once going, I could do as well as other people."

"Could you keep accounts?"

"I never did yet. Mathematics ain't in my line."

"Could you be a railway porter?"

"I wouldn't if I could."

"I should say you were tolerably limited. What can you do best?"

Robert laughed, but a little uneasily. He did not enjoy this narrowing down to facts.

"Oh, come. You women don't understand," said he. "The thing is to get a place and then perform the duties of the place. I wasn't brought up to work."

"What were you brought up to do? To shirk work?"

"Well, yes. We had an old tumbledown plantation, and we shirked all we could. We were rich before the war,—but I don't remember about that. We raised enough cotton most years to carry us through. Still, when I sold the plantation, the mortgages ate up all but a thousand dollars of the price."

"That was after you married."

"Yes; Margaret had forty thousand dollars. On my soul, I lie awake at night sometimes, thinking what a pity it was that money was not invested so that we could not get hold of the principal. But I put twenty thousand into a silver mine, and that was the end of that. Ten thousand dribbled away, so that I can't be sure what did become of it. Finally, the last ten thousand I placed in what ought to have been the best speculation in the world. A fellow, a friend of mine, went into coffee-growing—"

"I have heard all this."

"Oh, I dare say. Margaret never forgave me for my bad luck. A woman does not realize what difficulties a man has to encounter. She sits safely at home watching events with elevated brows, and criticising the least mistake with an assurance of her deadly superiority."

"Putting egotism aside now, do you consider yourself superior to Margaret?"

"I'm a man and she's a woman."

"How have you proved your manliness to her? You lost her money and said, 'now support yourself.'"

"I never said such a word."

Miss Longstaffe laughed.

"Don't let's talk of these disagreeable subjects," Robert now remarked. "I came to ask a favor of you to-day."

Miss Longstaffe gave him a shrewd glance.

"A favor?" she repeated, in an incredulous tone.

"I want you to lend me a hundred dollars," said he, crossing his legs, and looking at her with a fascinating air. "It will be only for a few days."

"Lend you a hundred dollars!" she exclaimed. "What for?"

"I can use it advantageously just now. As I was saying, I need a chance, and somebody ought to give it to me. I don't think I'm fairly treated —"

"By whom?"

"Don't let's argue. I think you are my friend. It costs me something of course to make this request—it is almost impossible for a woman to understand just how a man feels when he is weak and powerless. She thinks he has only to will it, and be strong —"

"I don't think you understand women very well. We don't altogether believe you to be demi-gods. The mistake seems to be in the other direction. You evidently consider women to be all-powerful. How am I to get a hundred dollars for you?"

"What's a hundred dollars to a woman as well off as you are?"

Miss Longstaffe laughed again.

"If I had hundred-dollar bills by the ten thousand," she said, with an air of intense satisfaction in her own words, "nothing should induce me to give you one."

He colored angrily. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"You do not inspire me with any wish to give you money. I am a creature of inveterate prejudices. I don't like to see money thrown away."

"Thrown away? I don't understand you."

"I mean to be absolutely plain. Margaret and I make a little money, and every cent we earn tells in the payment of the rent, in the food we consume, the clothes we wear, the oil and coal we burn. If I had a hundred dollars to spare, it would go towards lightening some of your poor wife's burdens. This sketch of you, for which I shall ask fifty dollars (dear at the price I consider it to be, too), may bring in a little something — more likely not. If it should, I shall give the price to Margaret, and tell her that, for almost the first time in her life, her husband is of some small advantage to her."

Miss Longstaffe's words were cutting; she was both willing to wound, and not afraid to strike. She, perhaps, underestimated Robert's sensitiveness, and considered him too thick-skinned to feel anything except the lash. And, as a rule, he was callous. What she did not realize, was his present disappointment and disgust at her easy scorn of his request for a loan. He had built confidently upon getting

the money, congratulating himself all the while upon being such a knave of hearts that no woman could resist him. He was now accordingly in a great rage, sprang to his feet, and advanced towards her with almost a threatening air. She laughed outright.

"Oh, Mr. Kent," she exclaimed, "what a boy you are! What do you think of yourself, honestly and truly, in your own heart?"

He burst into a torrent of words, rambling, incoherent, but full enough of furious meaning. No woman should talk to him like that, he declared, — a woman, too, who begrudged a little paltry sum; — he would teach her — he would teach everybody that he was not a boy — that he had some rights —

To prove this perhaps, he snatched the portrait from the easel, and held it at arm's length away from the artist.

"If you don't let me have the money," said he, "I'll tear this picture to pieces."

Miss Longstaffe sat quite impassive, looking at him. He was not sensitive to shades of manner, but he did understand her contempt for him. The loss of the money he had considered as already his made him furious, and it touched him to the quick to see that he actually had not strength to move one whit this grim, yellow-faced woman, either by blandishments or threats. There was only one way he knew of punishing her for her merciless arrogance, and he tore the canvas twice across, then stamped on it.

"See if you make money out of my picture," said

he, in paltry triumph. At the same time, he reddened and grew confused under her ironic glance. He was sorry he had done the thing, for the idea had pleased him of having his portrait exhibited. He felt humiliated and defeated, realizing that his rage against her was impotent.

"I told you I would not be treated like a boy," he muttered under his breath, and left the studio, banging the door behind him, and clattering down the stairs.

He longed to avenge himself upon somebody, and went through the rooms below, looking for his wife. Margaret was sitting at the writing-table in the parlor, with her elbows on the table, and her head between her two hands. She did not look up when her husband entered.

"Look here, Margaret," said he, "I'm not going to have that Miss Longstaffe in the house any longer."

She dropped her hands and turned her face towards him.

"What did you say?" she asked, as if she had not understood.

"You've got to turn Miss Longstaffe out. I'll never sit down at the same table with her again. She has insulted me."

"Insulted you! How?" Margaret darted a glance of fierce questioning at Robert. "I don't believe it," she said, with decision. "Sarah is the kindest friend that either you or I have in the world. In fact, she is our only friend. She may tell home-truths,—that is her way,—but —"

"Home-truths — you may call them that, but I assure you she heaped scorn and reproaches upon me."

"Scorn for what? Reproaches for what? I thought you seemed to be immense friends lately. I have wondered again and again what was behind your pretty behavior to her. There seemed to be an air of fervid intention merely in the way you passed her the sugar." Margaret looked at him searchingly. "What did you ask her for?" she demanded, growing more and more vehement. "I know what it was," she said, beginning to pant, and growing pale even to the lips. "*Robert, you asked her for money.*"

He stirred uneasily under her gaze.

"And if I did," he began — "if I did just ask her for a mere temporary loan —"

"Are you so dull?" said Margaret; "I do not ask if you are not too noble to ask alms of a woman, but simply if you are so dull that you do not see that we are short of money. Sarah has borne all the expenses here of late. I have made nothing. I have been utterly powerless. My little torch has gone out; I walk in darkness, not an idea comes to me. Two weeks ago I was asked to write a story, for which I was promised a hundred dollars; and ever since I have been trying to think of something."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"Oh, I know," said Margaret, "that it is nonsense for me to say these things to you." She leaned her head on her hand and seemed to meditate, then scratched little items on the blank paper before her, —

and presently, when she had made a little column of figures, she added them up. "You have had four hundred and twenty-five dollars of me since you came," she now remarked, in a business-like tone. "Say two hundred have gone for clothes, what became of the rest?"

He was standing at the other side of the table, and now thrust his hands into his trousers pockets.

"What's that to you?" he said, savagely.

"It seems to be my unique affair."

"I grant that you have dribbled out little sums to me, — never enough at a time to enable me really to undertake anything in good earnest."

Margaret had never before reasoned upon the subject of Robert's continued appeals for money. Had she been rich, it would have been her way to give him all he asked for, without stint and without question, conscious that money makes up in part for the lack of sympathy and confidence. Now she was suddenly of confronted with a new idea, and her mind began to be busy with the probabilities of the case.

"I am afraid," she said, in a low voice, "that you gamble."

He turned away fiercely, with a flushed face, and strode to the window.

"Gamble," he repeated, as if ironically. "What do you women know about such matters?"

"Happily very little. You do gamble, — I am certain you do. You gambled years ago, — yes, that is it. How blind I was! I meant to be faithful and generous, and yet here I have been lavishing upon

you all my little reserve of money, which I ought to have kept for Gladys — ”

“Look here, Margaret,” said Robert, “I am not going to be beaten and bullied by women in this way. If this was all the kindness you had in your heart for me, why did you send for me?”

Margaret was walking to and fro. At this appeal she stopped, looked at him, then raised her eyes.

“I send for you?” she repeated ironically.

“Oh, but you did though. You got the child to write. She would never have thought of it out of her own head. I understood it in a moment; you were always up to those clever dodges—making a cat’s-paw out of the nearest person.”

She glanced at him again, and seemed to be pondering the problem he presented to her mind.

“I came at some sacrifice to myself,” he went on, in an aggrieved tone. “It cost me all my ready money to get away just then, so I arrived here with some urgent needs. It was only fair you should take a little trouble about me, — we’re husband and wife, ain’t we? Don’t you suppose I should have killed the fatted calf for you if you had come out to me at Rio?”

“I dare say you would, Robert,” said Margaret, with some archness. He disarmed anger by his naïve self-belief. She had always realized that since he was just the man he was, anyone, in order to bear with him, must be foolishly, incredibly tender.

“Of course I should,” he went on; “now don’t

turn the cold shoulder to a fellow in difficulties, but help him out a bit."

"What sort of difficulties?" she asked, with sudden anxiety, for his genuine eagerness became apparent to her.

"I must have some money to-day, or somebody may be after something in the house—in these very rooms."

Margaret turned cold all over.

"Is it a debt?" she whispered, all the color going out of her face.

He nodded; her look frightened him.

"How much?"

"Sixty-five dollars."

"Oh, Robert!" she said, drearily. "Oh, Robert!"

She stood still and seemed to reflect.

"It's an honest debt? You don't tell me what it is! Is it anything I am justified in paying?"

He laughed uneasily. "I know it's got to be paid," said he, "or else there'll be some trouble."

"You might sell your watch."

"It's pawned already. I've wanted fifteen dollars to redeem it, but I did not dare to think of that."

Margaret was too hopeless to waste words. The necessity for action was too predominant in her mind to allow her to spend herself in reproaches. She saw in rigid outline the inexorable fact that sixty-five dollars must be raised at once.

"I've got to do something I hate to do," she said; "something which I meant never to do under any pressure, and that is to take from little Gladys'

money. I meant long ago to have put it in the savings bank for her; but she was so fond of the bits of gold that various people had given her, it seemed like discounting its value to put it into ordinary dollars and cents."

If she had been looking at Robert, she would have seen his crimson face; but she had turned away and was crossing the room. She was sick at heart over the necessity of this sacrilege. She was wondering if it would not be better to sell some of her own jewels, but she shrank from what seemed to be the final resource before starvation. She was fruitful of resource, and ran over every possible expedient for raising the sum, which was not, after all, so large but that she might make it up by a few days' work, if only the cloud would lift from her brain and the torpidity from her heart.

By the time she reached the cabinet where she supposed the money to be, she had half decided in her own mind not to make use of it, but to go to certain of her publishers instead and borrow the amount. The mechanical impulse nevertheless carried her to the point of opening the cabinet and taking the little safe in her hands. She just lifted it, and was about to put it back and turn away when its light weight startled her. She drew it out and shook it incredulously. There could be no doubt about it—the box was empty!

"There is no money here!" she gasped in alarm. "What can have become of it?"

Swift hurrying images of burglars and thieving

household servants crossed her mind. She rallied her powers to remember how long it was since she had examined it.

"It is the strangest thing in the world!" she went on. "You don't know anything about it, I suppose, Robert?"

She turned sharply, with a sudden suspicion, and looked at him. His guilty face told her the whole story.

"Oh, Father in heaven!" she exclaimed, the tears streaming from her eyes, "he has taken it! He has robbed his child!"

"I haven't robbed her at all," declared Robert, stoutly. "Gladys offered it to me—insisted on my taking it—and I did so simply out of kindness to her."

But Margaret was crying as if her heart would break.

"I tell you she gave it to me of her own free will," said Robert, bewildered by such grief, and dejected by the sense that everything had such a bad showing for him, yet, at the same time, angrily impatient that such far-off and dead issues should be taking up time to-day, when so much had to be done. "It's no use crying for spilled milk," he added, with easy philosophy. "The money is gone. If I say I'm sorry to have hurt your feelings about it, that amounts to very little, and it goes without saying."

Margaret had sunk helplessly into a chair, and now raised her wet face and looked up, her anguish taking the shape of long-drawn sobs instead of

fresh tears. He tried to take her hand, but she withdrew it.

"It's no use," she said; "no use —"

"What's no use?"

"I cannot live this way. No woman is bound to live this way. I don't want to hate you, but I shall get to hating you if you go on murdering all the belief and trust Gladys has in you." She said this in a heavy, monotonous tone, looking straight before her, her hands clenched together on her breast. "What is one to expect from you? You have no conscience, no honor—you don't feel the scorching shame you bring on me."

"That's pretty talk from a wife to her husband."

"What do you expect to hear from me? That I look up to you, honor and believe in you? If so, you must believe me a creature scantily endowed with reason."

"You took me for better or worse, you know."

"So I have said all these years," cried Margaret. "When everybody has told me I ought not to go on holding up such a fiction as my marriage was, and imposing it on the world as a reality,—that I ought to be free from you, free to live my own life,—I have replied with that paltry commonplace, that I had taken you for better or worse, that I would not go back upon my marriage vows."

"Do you mean," stammered Robert, "that they meant you ought to have a divorce?" He was curiously excited.

"Yes."

"Did you ever think of it yourself?"

"I have just told you what my reply was, — that is —"

"Did you ever think of getting a divorce?"

She looked him squarely in the face.

"Yes," she answered, quietly and sadly.

Robert shrank back abashed; there was a visible tremor in him from head to foot. He was totally unprepared for this idea suddenly thrust upon his consciousness; it seemed to cut the ground away from his very feet.

"I shouldn't have believed it of you, Margaret," said he; "I should not have believed it of you."

"No," she returned, "you are a man to go on committing all sorts of cruelties and selfishnesses, forgetting each as it goes by, and not realizing that the least thing we do is making a day of judgment for us."

"But don't you love me — just a little, Margaret — just for the sake of old times?"

"How can you ask me such a thing?" she demanded, impatiently. "Love you? I love Gladys — with all my heart. I love Gladys, and I have done for her all I could; I love light, and life, and work; I love friends; I love books, — my writing, — all the great world of intellect and energy. And how can I love you? What do you know or care about my pursuits? And, Heaven help me! what do I wish to know about yours? Love? Could you love anybody who hurt you persistently — wounded, bruised you at every point — defeated all your hopes — mortified and humiliated you?"

She put these questions cuttingly, looking him full in the face. He quivered as if under an electric shock.

"But I will get you the money," she said, with cold disdain. She rose, and passed into her own room, and Robert was left standing alone. He stood rooted to the spot for a moment or two, then began pacing up and down. He had felt keenly for a moment; but now a stunned and bewildered sensation took its place. Margaret did not love him, he said to himself. Somehow he had got used to the idea that she did love him, and had always counted on that. He had found a certain piquancy at times in the thought that if she were made aware of—well, of what she was far from suspecting—she would be jealous, wildly jealous. But after all she had not loved him, and she had not wanted him to come back. A strange feeling, made up of grief, rage, and stupor, overpowered him; and he sat down, leaned his head against the back of the chair, and closed his eyes. It seemed evident that it was Gladys who had written that letter, and against her mother's will. He had been sure that Margaret had dictated parts of it at least. When he came back, that had been genuine reluctance and dread she showed; and, finally, nothing but pity had overpowered her dislike of him. And he had laughed to himself, and thought her a clever actress.

A divorce? It had never occurred to him that there could be such a thing in Margaret's mind. She might be plotting it now. What was going on? He

was in none of her secrets. Was there a man behind it all? His self-belief was shaken at the thought. He had always felt vain and pleased at the notion that Margaret loved him in spite of his absence and his follies. His vanity was terribly wounded. He wished he could repudiate with indignation her idea that she must go and get this money for him. But how was he to manage without it? He felt himself to be rather base; but, after all, what is a man to do? If she scorned him—she had said once before that she scorned him, but he had not believed it. Now he all at once had an idea of her meaning.

The door opened, and Margaret came in in walking dress.

“I will be back in an hour,” she said, without looking at him. “You can wait here. I will bring you the money.”

He said nothing, and she went out. He wondered what she was going to do. She had helped him out of many a cruel pinch before. He remembered how once she had managed to free him from the necessity of fighting a duel—had cleverly contrived to make the worse appear the better part, and forced the other fellow to apologize. She was a clever woman; there were few so handsome; and she was as young as ever. . . . Of course, there was another man. He ground his teeth in a rage, and uttered a despairing cry.

The handle of the door was turning. He looked up. Margaret was coming back with an envelope in her hand. She had met the postman at the door. She laughed slightly as she came in.

"Destiny contrives," said she, "that I shall have at my need precisely sixty-five dollars. Here is a check for that amount from an editor who has been so long looking at a little story of mine that I had forgotten its existence."

She went to her desk and indorsed the check, making it payable to her husband.

"Can I trust you with this?" she asked, looking at him with a keen glance. "Will you pay your debt with it?"

"I swear to you —"

"Oh, do not swear!"

"Margaret," said he, stretching out his hand to her, "Margaret —"

She did not touch his hand, but appeared to be waiting to hear what he had to say.

"If I were to ask you —" he began. "Would you tell me if I were to — no, I will not ask you. For I know — I know — if you had told me yourself, I could not be surer of it."

"I don't in the least understand you."

He had started up. He seemed to be half choking.

"I shall go and pay this at once," said he.

"I hope you will."

"Don't you believe it?"

"I should be glad to believe it, but it is so hard to believe after one has been deceived so long."

He made an angry gesture and went out, slamming the door. Margaret sat still looking after him. A cold hand seemed laid upon her heart — and she

felt remorseful for many things she had said. But, after all, had she told him half the truth of his incompetence, bad management, — his faults? No, not the hundredth part. And his robbery of poor little Gladys she could not get over.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DAY OF RECKONING.

ROBERT did not come home that night, nor the next day, nor the next, and Margaret had time to question herself thoroughly before she saw him again.

Again and again we have told poor Margaret's self-reproaches, her waverings, her aspirations, her many sad mistakes about herself; now that an actual time of trial had come, we will not invade the sanctuary of her thoughts, as she saw unveiled before her the terrors and splendors of the Divine presence, before which she hid herself.

It was the fourth evening after her husband had gone away that Margaret was cowering over the fire, smitten with a dread so terrible that it froze the very life-springs within her. The blaze could not warm her hands nor unstiffen the rigid face. Gladys was in bed; Miss Longstaffe had been out since noon, on a grim errand, — and Margaret was expecting her now every moment. Twice she had thought it was her step on the stairs, but it passed by to some other part of the house. Now, when she heard a firm, regular and rapid foot approach her

door, she started up, believing that some good news was at hand. Miss Longstaffe came in, however, with a quiet shake of her head, and Margaret sank back with a groan.

"No news," she said. "No news, good or bad, —although it would be hard to tell what good news one can expect."

"It would be good news to hear that he was alive," said Margaret. "I have come to the point where I shall be satisfied with that."

"The men I consulted said he had probably left the country."

"I don't believe that. He is either ill or he has killed himself."

"No, not that."

"It is in my mind all the time. He looked hunted and desperate that day." Margaret pressed her hands against her hot eyeballs, as if to shut out a cruel vision.

"It was all my fault," said Miss Longstaffe. "I said uncomfortable things to him. I put him in a temper. All my life long I have been an abominable Pharisee, an uncompromising egotist. I always take it for granted I know more than other people, before I speak; after the act I can see my own folly and stupidity as well as anyone. I flatter myself that no one in the world surpasses me in the faculty of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time."

Miss Longstaffe hurried into these self-criminations perhaps in order to divert the other from her ceaseless condemnation of herself.

"Don't take your sins so terribly to heart, Sarah," Margaret roused herself to say. "I don't imagine you did Robert any harm. It's I that am a wicked woman — a wicked woman." She had risen, and now began to pace to and fro, stopping now and then to put her hand on Miss Longstaffe's shoulder or stroke her face. It was as if, beset by terrors which surrounded her like a band of dumb and mysterious enemies on every side, threatening, and chilling her flesh and blood, she found something of comfort in making herself tangibly conscious of a human presence.

"Aunt Dora — Mrs. Sinclair — was here after you went out," she said, finally breaking the silence. "She has heard dreadful reports about Robert. She came to reason with me about it all. She thinks something ought to be done. She said it was uncomfortable having me talked about in this way."

"Uncomfortable for her! Poor woman!"

"Yes, — she thinks it might all be quietly arranged; or, if I persisted in living with Robert, why would it not be well to go off to some quiet place?"

"Mrs. Townsend has been talking about you."

"Oh, no doubt."

"She has probably exaggerated everything."

"Aunt Dora said that I somehow did contrive to provoke comment and conjecture. A while ago everybody was saying that if anybody saw a man with me it was sure not to be my husband, and that now if anybody saw a man with me it was certain to be my husband."

"Oh, well, one does not care for a pin-prick like that."

"Not in the least. Mrs. Charlton came in; and before Aunt Dora had prepared a cut-and-dried programme for me, she had to take leave."

"What did Mrs. Charlton want?"

"I don't know, except that she had some tickets to sell for some private theatricals. I told her that Robert and I were very quiet people, besides being very poor people, and that we should let the fashion of the world go by. I think," Margaret added, "she wanted to ask questions, but saw that I was in no humor to answer them. While she prattled on to me about the news, I wanted to say to her, 'Dear madame, please go and talk with your fellow-beings; I do not belong to the human species.'"

Miss Longstaffe made no response, and silence came over them again. All at once some sound in the street startled them, — a carriage had stopped a little farther on, and now slowly backed to their own curbstone. In another instant there was a noisy rap at the front door, and the bell-handle was pulled and let go with a sharp clang.

The door was opened on the moment; and there were men's voices below, and steps on the stairs.

Margaret rushed forward, but Miss Longstaffe pushed her back with all her force, and herself opened the door and looked out, — then, with a warning gesture to Margaret to stay where she was, she went out, closing the door behind her. Margaret had not long to wait.

"Your husband is here," Miss Longstaffe said, coming back and speaking in a dull, matter-of-fact tone. "He is ill, — is at present quite unconscious. He must be put to bed."

"Yes, yes," cried Margaret, frantically. "Oh, I am so thankful — I —"

"Wait a little. It is best you should not see the men. They will carry him into my room. Is not that best? Gladys is asleep in yours."

"Yes."

"Sit down for five minutes, that is a good girl. You can see him then. Cry all you like now, but be calm by that time."

For Margaret had broken into terrible weeping. It was a reprieve.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A NEW CHAPTER IN MARGARET'S LIFE.

ROBERT was very ill for twenty days; at first with fever and delirium alternating with stupor, and afterwards reduced to a condition of infantile weakness in which it was a matter of instinct, without thought or reason, to accept nourishment and every sort of service from the hand of another. By the time he was well enough to gather the meaning of what went on, he was so accustomed to the continual presence of his wife, that any state of existence in which she was not close beside him, ministering to his comfort with smiles and caresses, was something hazy and dream-like. It was not his habit to question motives and actions critically, but it did occur to him that he wanted to be sure what feelings Margaret had for him underneath this exterior of tenderness and pity, and he whispered to her one day when she hung over him,

"After all, you do love me a little, Margaret, don't you?"

"I love you dearly, Robert," she answered, with a serene smile into his eyes. "I'm going to begin and be a good wife at last."

"That's right," said Robert, "and I'll be the

best sort of a husband to you. I always meant to be."

"Only get well," murmured Margaret, passing her hand over his brow, and speaking as if he were a sick child. "That is all I ask of you at present."

Robert basked in the comfort and cheer of his sick-room, but his excesses in those three terrible days had given his constitution a shock from which it could not easily rally. Yet Margaret did not let him once lose hope. She believed, and acted on the belief, that this interval of utter solitude and dependence upon each other had been given them in order to fix and make substantial all the props which were to support their lives henceforth. She could do nothing except take care of him. Her many offices as nurse and companion took all her time and all her strength. She slept only when he slept. His least movement roused her. She had no chance for dreaming reveries. She could not spend her imagination in an ideal world, among images of nobility, beauty and charm, in which he and his very human frailties had no place. Her heart and brain were too practically engrossed to allow her even to think that this was an answer to her old prayer for work which should not only enkindle a high motive but satisfy it. She could not say to herself now, "I am doing nobly and bravely;" for what else was there for her to do save to devote herself to her husband?

Those three days when she believed that he had rushed from her reproaches to end his life, she had

prayed all the time. The season had gone by when she could trust her generous impulses and believe in herself, or when she could take counsel from flesh and blood. She had looked higher for aid than she had ever looked before. Whatever man's intellect may prove, the heart of man, at least, believes in sacrifice. Margaret had at last brought to the foot of the Cross her costliest treasure, and now offered it there. It was herself: her love and pleasure in herself: her proud independence: her delight in freedom: her unchastened will.

"These shall all be thine, O Lord," she said, again and again, "only let my husband come back to me."

And when Robert came back alive, it was a sign from Heaven to her that her sacrifice was accepted. Nothing had been quite clear to her before, because she had not grasped firmly as the real clews of her destiny those motives which consecrate life for a woman. It was all a simple matter now that she saw clearly whither her path led, which was in the line of her duty. As for happiness, she no longer took that into account; happiness did not seem to her nowadays a matter of choice. She had not found that by indulging her own wishes recklessly she had been especially happy; accordingly, it was just as well to make an effort in the opposite direction, and indulge others instead of herself.

Now that she and Robert and Gladys were together all day, she no longer felt any complications

or want of harmony in their relations. Miss Longstaffe could be one with them, and the rest of the world made no particular difference. Robert had a knack of invalidism: he was as easily amused as a child, by talk or a game; his meals were a subject of engrossing interest, and he was rarely pettish except when he was tired.

"Isn't it beautiful, mamma?" Gladys used to say, every day radiant with a newly-found joy. "You love to take care of poor papa, don't you?"

"Yes, indeed," Margaret would answer; "and to see him get stronger under one's eyes, that is so pleasant."

"And it's good that papa came home."

"Oh, yes, dear; and we'll never let him go away again."

Thus Gladys' spectre was laid. Her letter had not been a mistake after all.

It was late in the spring before Robert was well again, and in May they gave up their rooms in town, and moved to a house in the hilly country of New Jersey, which belonged to Miss Longstaffe and had no tenant. So, when everyday life actually began once more for Robert Kent and his wife, it was under entirely fresh conditions. They lived with Gladys in an old wooden house in the midst of a region populated by farmers and market-gardeners. And here it was that Robert for almost the first time in his career found something he could earn money honestly by. He kept the books and wrote the letters which carried on the outside business of a great seedsman

and horticulturist, who had a national reputation but could barely read or write. For this Robert was paid eighty dollars a month, and Margaret found they could live very comfortably on this income. She kept house, looked after her husband and child, and never wrote a line. Miss Longstaffe spent every Sunday with them, and, for a time, watched Margaret with anxiety, ready to give her help if she needed lesser or secondary help.

She had always believed cordially in Margaret, but she could not at first accept the fact that Margaret was strong enough to resign everything hitherto dear to her without an occasional lapse into a mood which brought home a hopeless sense of despair and loss. She knew that in heroic moments almost any form of renunciation seems easy. Margaret had loved light and happiness, social excitements, and luxurious surroundings. Now she was reduced to meagre conditions. She worked hard, without help from anyone. She lived apart from almost every suggestion of the bright, busy world of beauty, intellect and art: she did not even allow herself the exercise of her creative fancy.

But if Margaret had her moments of despondency; if temptations did assert themselves, no one knew of it. The least cold mist of a want of sympathy between herself and Robert she thrust aside instantly by a look, a word, a loving action performed, which must break down the least barrier between them. She realized the fact that, to keep Robert happy and satisfied, she must be close by his side,

loving him, making much of him, happy and content in the low scale of possibilities which fate offered them. For Robert was proud: that is, he had the instincts of a proud family.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ROBERT RUSHES ON HIS FATE.

THE second summer Robert began to grow a little restless.

"Don't you think nature intended me for something a little above the position of old Wilkins' drudge," he perpetually asked. "A man that barely knows the alphabet, counts on his fingers, and says, 'Them beans is a-bustin' the ground.'"

"All that is no measure of Mr. Wilkins' inferiority," Margaret would reply, laughing. "To see him and hear him makes me feel that the alphabet, grammar and mathematics are not at all essential to success in this world. It is a happy accident, however, that he is slightly dependent on what we call civilization, and accordingly is willing to pay you eighty dollars a month to keep his accounts and write his letters for him."

"What's eighty dollars a month? I declare, Margaret, you are the least ambitious woman I ever knew. I used to think quite the reverse; but, from the way you are content to go on here, one would suppose you had never known anything better."

"What ought one to ask more? A sufficiently comfortable house, delightful country air, good

health, nothing to do save to take care of my husband and child! Surely, no sensible woman ought to murmur at such a fate as that!"

"And all on eighty dollars a month! I'm glad you don't complain, — but you can hardly expect a man brought up as I was, to be satisfied. I think I'll try something else."

"Oh, Robert dear," said Margaret, hanging about him. "I'm sure you are happy here. Let us stay on for a time. We need not settle down to the irrevocable as if there could be nothing better for us, but just consider this little home a temporary refuge, a niche from the showers of the cruel world. That great, cruel outside world may go on as it likes, and we are independent of it here. Look in the papers and what do you see? Strikes, failures, — all sorts of business troubles. And we are safe, for Mr. Wilkins is far too thrifty a financier to risk any losses. Make yourself indispensable to him, and who knows but that some day he will take you into partnership?"

"That old skinflint? Never, if I know it."

"But be contented for a time."

"Well, we'll try it another six months and then I'll see if I can't better myself. One thing is, there's no society in the place. It isn't good for Gladys."

"Gladys has me; I don't think she needs anything else. And you've got me, and I've got both of you, — what more does anyone ask?"

"Well, you're a witch," Robert remarked. "But, for all that, I should like to see a man who has been

about and taken the good of the world, and exchange a few words with him. I often feel as if I were turning into a cabbage or a squash."

So long as it was merely this restless mood which Margaret had to combat, she could carry her point very well; but a sulky, surly devil sometimes got hold of her husband and goaded him for days. His sickness eighteen months before had been an experience to frighten him, and for a while he was glad of all sorts of safeguards against temptations. It had, too, taken him a year to recover fully his physical strength and tone; and so long as a certain lassitude lasted, it was agreeable enough to have easy work all day and a seat at a fireside at night between wife and child. After doubting Margaret's affection, it was, besides, something to realize that she had given up everything for him. She was a delightful companion, could say the wittiest and most amusing things, and keep him in a capital humor. She had besides rare skill and ease in domestic matters, and he missed little or nothing. She could cook to perfection, and it was little short of a miracle to see her make an omelette or broil a chop. There was never anything slipshod about her, — and she and Gladys were to his eyes as well dressed as when they lived within a stone's throw of Broadway. All these miracles being effected in his behalf, Robert for a long time had the magnanimity to stifle the complaints which rose to his lips, and play the rôle assigned as if he liked it. He listened with indulgent ear to Margaret's sprightly talk, petted Gladys, and helped her with her

arithmetic; assisted Wilkins in his cauliflower and egg-plant speculations, as if he had forgotten the past and accepted a present and future which beamed upon him under the most glowing auspices. His health and vigor, which long excesses and life in an unhealthy climate had undermined, once renewed however, gave him a stimulus, not for hard work, but for variety and excitement. He began to hate Wilkins.

"An eagle can't spend his life in a poultry yard," he said to himself twenty times a day. With the blood of Cavaliers in his veins, how was he to endure such servitude as this? He talked like a child whose toy has been taken from him. He panted for his old privileges, his old delights. How dreary everything was here! How mean, paltry, unworthy of a man like himself, all his surroundings, occupations, and necessities! The idea of Margaret's being contented in a neighborhood like this! He tried to make her responsible for his descent in the social scale.

"Why on earth don't you write nowadays?" he began to question her unceasingly. "With a talent like yours, you ought not to hide it under a bushel."

"Let me confide to you," Margaret would answer, always playfully, for she was armed at most points, "that I hadn't a talent at all. So long as the world was fresh to my perceptions, I was stirred to say something about it. Now I haven't an idea, — I am of a most sickening commonplaceness. And it is such a comfort, dear, after fighting to keep my place so long, to have you provide for me."

"Provide! A miserable pittance of eighty dollars

a month. But if you are contented, I suppose I must be."

There was little consecutiveness in Robert's ideas, and all his feelings were superficial: but as weeks went on, Margaret found that his revolt was becoming more obstinate. The clouds which covered his brow were only dispelled under her influence: sometimes, when she left him to himself, she perceived something in his glance which indicated the silent working of some fixed idea. With Margaret and Gladys to caress, flatter, and amuse him, he would unbend for the evening, but only to emerge next morning from sleep plunged in deeper discontent and melancholy. Margaret felt at times at her wit's end, and it seemed a piece of phenomenal good fortune when, just at a moment when a change of some sort seemed an absolute necessity, he was summoned to the South by his cousin, as a witness in a law suit, which involved some neglected and dubious interests of his own.

He was like a child released from school. He set off within three hours, Margaret undertaking to keep Mr. Wilkins' books and write his letters in her husband's absence. Miss Longstaffe was staying with them at the time, and she promised to remain and take care of the house.

It was the fifteenth of August when Robert left home. For a week after he had gone, Margaret went through her duties mechanically, saying little to anyone, and, when evening came, sitting on the doorstep gazing out into the darkness in utter silence.

Miss Longstaffe respected her mood and understood it. There had been a prolonged strain upon her energies, and her nerves were by this time in bad condition. What was she thinking? What was passing in her heart? Were there still rebellions, and unavailing regrets in that unconquered soul of hers? Or was she saving her strength for some new effort? Gladys would sit beside her until her own bedtime came, caressing the hands which lay folded on her lap. Her mother was to her in these days an object of wonder and of worship: at the same time remote, inaccessible, not the old gay mamma of enchanting prettinesses, whirlwinds of devices and caprices: rather a sort of Iphigenia, offering herself day by day that favoring winds might blow.

At first Robert's departure produced upon his wife the effect of a stupor: everything about her seemed legendary and dreamlike. She neither remembered what had passed, nor looked forward to the future. Her soul had had little sustenance during this long time of absolute self-surrender, and it needed for a time to retire into itself, gather repose in itself. It seemed to her for many a day as if, — unless this opportunity for solitude had come, — as if her faculties must have given way under the pressure of that terrible weariness. Her passionate desire to do all for her husband that could be done, and her long struggle to acquit herself of her duty, had left deep traces on her mind. She had had no personal wishes nor inclinations, — and it had been no trivial effort for Margaret to abjure her own wishes and her own

needs. Now that she was free to speak, to think, to assert herself, without that persistent anxiety about Robert, — she felt her liberty like a dead weight ; it pressed upon all her faculties, and benumbed them.

By degrees, however, her first dulness gave way, and her mind resumed its independence and energy. Robert had not written ; but then he never did write, and his silence was no bar upon her and Gladys' sending letters to him. She was not satisfied with telling him all about herself and the household affairs, her day's work at Mr. Wilkins's ; her imagination went forth and encountered all his experiences, and made an effort to conquer them for him. About the first of September came bad accounts of yellow fever in the Gulf cities and at some points inland not many miles distant from Redbank, where Robert was supposed to be. Margaret knew too much about that scourge of the tropics not to dread the sound of the name. Her father had died of yellow fever. She telegraphed, first beseechingly, then imperatively, to Robert to come home. He vouchsafed a word of reply to her second message.

I am safe enough. Business is business. ROBERT.

But within forty-eight hours Margaret received this despatch from her husband's cousin and namesake, whom he had gone to see at Redbank.

Your husband is down with the fever. Come if you can. ROBERT CARY KENT.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A LONG JOURNEY.

It was almost a three days' journey to Redbank, a journey of torturing slowness for the last half of the way, and the weather at the North was sultry in the extreme. Margaret had thrust a few clothes into a bag; and started within an hour after receiving the news of her husband's illness, in spite of Gladys' prayers and Miss Longstaffe's adjurations.

"I could not do anything except go to Robert," was her only answer to them both.

It was useless to argue that by the time she reached him he would be either out of danger or beyond human speech and sympathy. Had he been on the other side of the world, she would have responded to the summons just the same. Having once actually given herself, it was all or nothing with Margaret.

But all through her journey she thrilled under the remembered pressure of Gladys little arms about her neck. She tried to save her strength, to sleep and rest, to keep her fancy from overmastering time and space, and bringing her back vivid and cruel images of what she was to meet. But she could not escape from her thoughts, let her strive as she might

to stifle and suspend them. Every suggestion of the journey back to her old home softened and stirred her heart. What a weary maze these years had been, and how strange that the clew finally led her to her starting-place.

Whether benignantly or with needless cruelty of mental action, nothing that her mind could present kept away from her. She seemed to hold in her hand the sheaves of her twenty-eight years, and to be carrying them back to the scene of her birth to lay them down.

"He that now goeth on his way weeping, and beareth forth good seed, shall doubtless come again with joy, and bring his sheaves with him." Alas, alas!

What were her sheaves, — what use had she made of that young life which eight years before she had carried away to the North, feeling it of incalculable worth and richness and promise. Had she not spent its force on trifles, — its brightness in a confused glare, — its sweetness in self-love? It was as well, perhaps, she said to herself, that she was likely to die, — yet she loved life still. That shining torch she had upheld so long, now to be quenched in the great spreading sea of death, still seemed half unspent. But it was better perhaps that it should be put out.

It was on the second morning after she set out that these thoughts were most grievous in her mind. The night had given her little rest, and the last day's physical fatigue and discomfort had overpowered any soothing slumber, filling her mind with hideous

images, urging and terrifying her until there was a blessed relief in the sight of the gray dawn, and the knowledge that before the end of the afternoon she would reach the final stage of her journey. Before the sun had risen she had to leave the cars and wait at the station for an hour, until another train came, which took her to the branch road which led to Red-bank. Everything was familiar and easily recognizable to her now,—the ugliness, the squalor, of the little station itself, the dusty roads which led to it, the brown fields stretching on every side, the distant prospect of hills all looking verdureless and almost brown.

Margaret rejected the proffer of breakfast at a neighboring house which was called a hotel. She ate some of the last of the sandwiches she had brought from home, and drank some milk she hired a little darkey to find for her and fill her flask with. She did not sit down. She was glad to move up and down, feeling an occasional waft of freshness from the stirring of the breath of dawn. She watched the sun come up dreamily, thinking to herself of the places it would light up: dim, shady nooks about cool springs mirroring maidenhair in their transparent depths; fragrant and dewy beds of lilies; broad rivers; streamlets breaking over precipices in cascades like veils of gauze floating in the air, whirled about by the breeze; the great green waves breaking in measures of rhythm on the shore. As she looked and dreamed she put her hand to her fevered face and brushed aside the flies and gnats which

gathered greedily upon her; a great sigh of weariness burst from her. What was she, where was she, why was she here, worn, tortured, hopeless? Then, with sudden ruthlessness, there burst upon her the realization of the reason that she had come. She seemed not to have thought since she set out of poor Robert. He was lying on his deathbed, perhaps already dead; and she had been thinking only of herself and her own life. She had tried to get rid of this love for herself; but it is not so easy to leave behind us some lifelong, habitual fault, no matter how hideous it may have become to us, and how much better we may love the purer life without it. Between our souls and safety there stands the spectre we would cast off, beseeching "save me too."

It was six o'clock when Margaret reached Redbank. She had been warned back already more than a dozen times. The fever was bad there, everybody said: hundreds of people had left the place; there were no good doctors and no nurses; and the disease was of a type so virulent that it made little difference about attendance. It was doubtful whether the train would run into so horribly infected a region after that day. There were no loungers at the station here; no officials, no vehicles. A deserted dog sat on the platform, looking hopefully towards the cars as they stopped, then howled as no one whom he recognized emerged. Margaret patted his head, and he followed her down the road, keeping close beside her. It was a relief to her to have

the poor brute with her. The awful desolation of the village appalled her. The first sign of life she perceived was a funeral procession of a man and woman who went slowly up the street in the distance. The man was wheeling a barrow containing a plank box: he seemed too weak for the burden, and occasionally rested himself, when the woman, who was crying bitterly, offered to help him. He put her away with a gesture and went on.

Margaret had not far to go. She reached her cousin Robert Kent's wide-verandaed, many-windowed house, the gates all swinging open, and turned in, the dog still keeping close beside her. As she entered the door a man appeared at the top of the stairway. When he saw her he began to descend, and the tears gushed over his face.

"It's you, Margaret; God bless you," said he. They looked at each other both frozen with horror and dread.

"You're in time," said he. "Robert was raving yesterday, but seemed better this morning, — however, I'm afraid there's little hope. We've lost three here; both the boys died yesterday, and Tiny to-day. When she went, Minnie gave up. She'll die too before many hours."

"Oh, cousin Robert," said Margaret, all her soul rushing towards the stricken man with pity. "Don't give up. I'll help you."

She was putting aside her dust-wrap and bonnet, and the master of the house brought her food and wine.

"Eat all you can," said he.

She ate and drank, and gave a chicken-bone to the dog, who fell to crunching it with a sort of passionate greed, but all the time wagging his tail and looking up at her.

Robert was lying moaning when Margaret went into his room. She spoke to him, and laid her hand on his; and he looked up at her, and began to mutter incoherently. Margaret busied herself about the bed, freshening and changing the pillows. She found a sponge and bathed the discolored and sunken face. The vital forces of the sick man all seemed to be withdrawing themselves; once or twice he looked at her; but there was no possibility of recognition in those dreadful eyes.

"If you know me, Robert," she said to him once, "shut your eyes, and that will tell me."

His lids fell, and for a time she believed that he had made a response; then, the silence and separation were so hopeless, she began to doubt. She talked to him, leaning close over his pillow; and once, when she told him Gladys had sent her love, there was a slight contraction of the features.

"I wish, dearest," she cried, "you'd say Margaret just once. I want to know — I want to feel that you know I'm here; that I came the instant I knew you needed me; that I try to do something for you; that I —"

A shade had settled across the face. . . In another half-hour the end had come.

What Margaret could not do for her husband she

had opportunity enough to do for others. Redbank was almost deserted; but she had twenty patients on her list before she had been there forty-eight hours. She wrote to Gladys, that first night, just these words on a postal card,—

“Your father is dead, Gladys; and it may be it will come to me to follow him. If so, you are Miss Longstaffe’s charge; and she will make you a good woman, my dear.”

Robert Cary Kent’s wife did not die, thanks to Margaret’s care. Indeed, after eight days more, the worst of the epidemic seemed to be over. Succor began to come to the stricken place from the outside world. Doctors and nurses from the North had arrived, and Margaret began to see the possibility of getting a little rest. Her cousin Robert was struck down, however, just as hope dawned.

“But we will have one of the best doctors for you,” Margaret said. “You shall not die—don’t think it.”

His mind was apathetic but unclouded.

“I’d sooner die than live, except for Minnie,” said he.

She nursed him all day; but at night, as she bent over him, all at once she tottered and clung to him.

“Oh, you’re ill!” said he. “Oh, my God! you’re ill!”

“No, I’m just tired,” said Margaret. She gave her place to one of the northern nurses, and went outside and looked up at the stars.

"It has come then," she said to herself; "I thought from the first it was to come."

The harvest moon was rising, beautiful as if, after the hot, intolerable day, it lighted up the under world of piled sheaves and happy slumber after toil.

It gave her a profound sense of the inscrutable government of the world, — miserable, oppressive, to the individual, but, after all, beneficent to the race, — too grand in its meaning and development to be altered by spoiled human conditions.

"It will go on just the same without me," Margaret said to herself.

"I want the doctor to see you," said the nurse, in her ear. "Mr. Kent is getting delirious in his anxiety about you."

"What doctor?"

"The doctor who has come from New York."

Margaret turned, putting her hand across the back of her head with a shudder.

"How do you feel?"

"My head and my neck pain me intolerably," said Margaret.

The nurse shivered at these symptoms.

Dr. Walton had stayed with his uncle first in one place in Europe, and then in another, for the past eighteen months. Mr. Bell had sunk gradually, and the first of August had died at Thun. By the time Alex had brought the body home to rest among the dust of its kindred, he was urged by a devouring sort of haste to obey the call from the fever districts at

the South, which actually grasped his will and conscience; and he was but forty-eight hours later than Mrs. Kent in taking the journey to the Gulf States. With him were two brother doctors and a staff of nurses, who were detailed to different points in the neighborhood of the city which had from the first been the centre of the infected district. Travelling about from city to village, and following up the deadly trail of the fever in the remotest village, it was to come about that Dr. Walton met Margaret once more.

At the first sign of failing strength in Mrs. Kent, Sister Sarah, one of the nurses, had sent for Dr. Walton, who was, she knew, to stay all night at Redbank. He came at once.

"You must not let this woman die," said Sister Sarah. "I don't feel sure that she has the fever; she may be simply exhausted. She has been nursing night and day for more than a week, after a journey from the North. To-day Mr. Kent was taken down, and she has not been herself since."

"Kent?" said Dr. Walton, sharply. "Kent? Is that the woman's name?"

"Yes. Mrs. Robert Kent."

"And her husband is ill?"

"Yes."

"Let me see him, and afterwards I will go to her."

Ten minutes later Dr. Walton emerged from Mr. Kent's room.

"That's a light case," said he. "With good care he need not be any worse than at present. Now let me see his wife."

Sister Sarah led him into a great disused parlor, where a dim light was burning.

"She said she did not want to lie in a bed where anybody had died," said the nurse softly, "and I respected her whim."

Margaret lay on a roomy sofa, just as she had thrown herself down an hour before, when life and strength seemed ebbing away. She was apparently unconscious that anyone had entered the room; there was no flicker of the eyelids,—no trembling about the mouth; in fact there seemed to be such scanty signs of life about her that Dr. Walton, after feeling at her wrist for a pulse and finding none, put his ear to her heart. Then he studied the pinched, pallid face for a moment, and put his fingers on the eyeballs.

He carried a case containing restoratives, and took out a flask of brandy and began pertinaciously to put a few drops between her lips, while he held hartshorn to her nostrils. After a time a flutter ran over her, a flutter not unlike that of a wounded bird which is handled roughly. He gave her more brandy—and in a little space discovered a thread-like motion at her wrist.

"I will save her—please God I will save her," he said, turning to Sister Sarah. "I think she was simply at the end of her strength. I don't see any sign of fever."

"Do you need me?"

"No."

Alex sat down beside the motionless woman, and

began to bathe the ghastly pale and attenuated face. His heart quaked within him at the change in her.

He persisted in feeding her with brandy and essence of beef, although once or twice she made a feeble motion of the hand as if to beg him to desist. She did not open her eyes, but as she gathered a little strength spoke occasionally, believing that Sister Sarah was with her.

"Sleep a little," he said to her softly. "Yield to your drowsiness and sleep a little. All is going well; Mr. Kent is better."

"Thank Heaven," she muttered, and presently she slept, — slept for four hours.

When she woke she opened her eyes with difficulty. There was a terrible pressure on her brain.

"How do you feel, Mrs. Kent?" said Alex. He had not left her for a moment.

She was looking at him with a strange expression.

"Am I alive or dead?" she said, bewildered.

"You are alive, and better, I hope."

"And this is you, really you?"

"Margaret, yes, — it is really I."

His strong clasp fastened upon both her hands. They stared each into the other's face.

"Oh," she said, after a moment's silence, "I am glad to see you. I don't mind dying now."

"You shall not die."

"This is death. I know it, I felt all the time that it was to be. All the time I was travelling here I knew that I was coming towards it. Now it is here."

"Take this."

"Is it worth while?"

"You trust me, do you not? Obey me then."

He had mixed egg and brandy, and fed her with it slowly. She did not say she trusted him, but she smiled at him.

"Now lie still! Don't say a word."

"But I have so many things to say."

"No matter."

He took both her hands in his, and, as if his touch might do her good, from time to time he put one of his hands upon her forehead. Unbidden thoughts came to him as he sat there, and more than once his face quivered and he had to struggle for composure. Here she was, — the woman he loved, — who, denied to him as she was by every law of God and man, had never for a moment lost her hold upon his supreme tenderness in all these months of separation; here she was within the circle of his arms if he reached them out, — yet whom he had no power to detain, — whom life would carry away from him if she lived, and whom death would drift across its shoreless sea if those ebbing forces did not soon rally. But this interval was something, — surely something. He could look into her face. She could look back at him. He had said to himself, all this time, that if he only knew that she had for a single moment really loved him, he could bear it better to have lost her. But to be incessantly mocked by the thought that she had only played with his feelings had embittered him. Now that she believed herself

to be dying, no veil hid the light in her eyes, which he found sweeter than his conception of Heaven itself. She loved him. It was not of that man in the other room she was thinking, but of him.

"You are pitying me now, are you not?" she whispered, after a half-hour had gone by.

He nodded.

"Memory does not bring up my foolish, wicked deeds to you? You forgive me, do you not, and will not force upon me again the necessity of repentance? God knows I have repented, and now I don't feel any longer the strength to repent."

"Hush, hush! Forgive you? I was never so hard as I seemed. I had to be too cruel not to be too tender."

"Have you married?"

"No; I shall never marry, Margaret."

He was bending close over her.

"I have always wondered," she murmured, in a dreamy way, "if I did you actual harm. I have not thought of it in one way,—that is, to analyze and go over it all,—for I have had only one thought; I gave myself up to Robert. I gave myself quite up to him. Still, I could not altogether forget —"

"Margaret, I loved you then. I love you now with an everlasting love. Rest on that. Forget my mistakes and your own mistakes. It was not to be. But nothing could alter the experience for me. All that is past. Here I am now, willing to die if you will only live."

"Oh, no; I will die—you shall live. God is good

to let me see you once more. After all, dying is not so hard. It is the living that is hard. Life is so cruel it does not forgive us that we are not strong, heroic, lucky, wise. No matter how faithful and patient one tries to be, nothing succeeds unless one has the knack of living. I wanted to be happy. I longed to be happy; but all I could do at last was just to lie down and let Juggernaut go over me. But now that I come to die I can smile at the worst life can do. It makes me all the more hungry for rest. This is peace."

He clasped her hands between his. He crushed them against his heart. He was certain that she deceived herself about this overhanging presence of death, yet he was terribly moved.

There was silence for a time. Then she said, "It is by chance you are here."

"Yes; I have been in the region for a week past."

"It is a hobby of yours, this fever, I know. I remember your talking about it. I have thought of you. Oh, such sights! such horrible sights, smells, sounds, —"

"If I had known earlier that you were here! How happened you to come South now?"

"Robert was here."

He looked at her gravely. "Robert," her husband, he believed to be in the room upstairs, slightly ill with the fever. He waited to have her ask news of him; but she said not a word.

Outside the day began to dawn. Dr. Walton had mixed a powerful opiate with the last cup of nourish-

ment he had given Margaret. She still lay looking at him.

"Can't you go to sleep?" he said, softly.

She smiled, dropped her eyelids, which first quivered painfully, then rested upon the burning eyeballs.

When Margaret opened her eyes again, it was towards sunset. She stirred languidly, feeling fettered and wholly unable to collect her thoughts. Somebody with a kind face, whom she did not recognize, brought her some broth, and she looked up gratefully and wonderingly.

"Oh, it is Sister Sarah!" she said, presently.

"Yes; I am Sister Sarah. Are you better, Mrs. Kent?"

"I don't know."

She looked round the room as if trying to fasten sensation and recollection to something she could not grasp.

"Oh, this was where I thought I was dying," she said, smitten with a full remembrance of what had passed.

"Yes; we were afraid at first you had the fever. But Dr. Walton said you would get well."

Margaret lay powerfully and sweetly thrilled with a presentiment that life was renewing itself in her veins.

"Dr. Walton watched you all day," said Sister Sarah. "It was not until five o'clock he went away. Then he said, 'Feed her the moment she wakes, but do not let her stir for twenty-four hours. Then put her on the cars and send her North.'"

"He has gone away, then!"

"Yes; they had telegraphed for him every hour, but he waited to see how you were progressing. You and he are old friends. I heard him tell your husband so."

"My husband?" repeated Margaret.

"Yes; Mr. Kent."

"That Mr. Kent who lives in this house?"

"Yes; is he not your husband?"

"No; he is my husband's cousin. My husband died just as I got here from the North."

Sister Sarah murmured something sympathetic and soothing. She was a clear-sighted woman, nevertheless, and she remembered that she had told Dr. Walton twice that Robert Cary Kent was Margaret's husband, and said to herself that if fate brought the doctor in her way again she would let him know how she had misled him.

CHAPTER XXX.

TIME JOGS ON.

MARGARET had been three months a widow before she heard the provisions of Mr. Bell's will. He had left Gladys a large sum of money,—a part of the income of which was to defray the expenses of her education, from the time she was twelve years old, but the bulk of which was not to come into her possession until she was twenty. Everything else had gone to Dr. Walton, who was the executor and Gladys' guardian; and Dr. Walton, it was said, had gone to the eastern Mediterranean, and would be there for a year.

Robert's death was hardly a reality to Margaret yet. It is easy for the outside world to say of worthless and ineffective people that they are "no loss;" but the tragedy of a spoiled and mismanaged life is apt to come home to some survivor, and Margaret was far from being ready to say to herself that it was well that Robert's brief and frustrated career was over. But any account given of her state of mind in those days would not be so much of the workings of her reason and her will as of the tortures inflicted by an enkindled conscience and a heightened imagination. Grief, like other human

actions and passions, is made up of all sorts of impulses and meanings. Gladys felt her father's death with a strange unchildlike sort of sorrow.

"He was away before, — he was away for ever and ever so long," she would say; "but then he could come back. Now he cannot come back."

"No, he cannot come back," Margaret would answer.

"But we can go to him, mamma."

"Yes, we are sure to go to him by and by."

"It is not his fault that he is away from us now, only ours that we are away from him."

"It is not our fault that we are alive, Gladys. First or last, we must all die; but we must live our lives first."

"I am glad it is not his fault," said Gladys, who apprehended simply and fully death's ample atonement and justification.

Time jogged on for Margaret and Gladys, and their way of living did not change. Margaret kept Mr. Wilkins's accounts and carried on his correspondence, taught Gladys, and looked forward all the week to Miss Longstaffe's coming from town to spend Sunday. Their friendship had deepened and become more and more to each of the two women. Miss Longstaffe would wonder to herself, now and then, how long it would last. Margaret was not likely to stay always in this old unpainted farmhouse far out of the real world, to the very reverberations of whose goings-on she was so strangely indifferent nowadays. Now and then a fragment of

news from the broken coterie to which they had once in a measure belonged, floated out to them. Colonel Weir had married a rich widow, and Tom Updegraeff had written a novel which had a great success. George Updegraeff had married Miss Charlton, and Elinor Devereux had electrified society by becoming the wife of Judge Norwood, a man of seventy, who offered her a high position in Washington. With Mrs. Townsend, alas! things no longer prospered. Too many competitors among fashionable women who loved to scribble gossip had risen for her to enjoy a monopoly of furnishing society items for the papers, and her income had fallen off. Besides this, she was compelled nowadays to have her husband live with her; a harmless lunatic, who had been shut up for years, but whose family at last insisted that he should no longer be robbed of his freedom. Poor Mr. Townsend had many virtues and only one fault, which, trying as it was, was hardly a crime to merit lifelong imprisonment. He had failed in business twenty years before, and ever since had had a dread of poverty, which led him to take precautions against it by secret- ing on his person bits of food, or any small valuables he might be able to lay his hands upon. His passion was to go to the shops and pick up something, unseen; and he led Mrs. Townsend a sad life during his decline into imbecile old age, and was so often in the police courts that it was the signal for a laugh for him to be brought in.

Miss Fothergill's career as an emancipator of her sex had also become restricted by her taking a hus-

band who gave her practical illustrations of what had formerly been drawn by her from a powerful fancy and the formulas in phrase-books.

Mrs. Sinclair and Ethel were unchanged. Ethel had not married ; and when Mrs. Sinclair came out now and then to see Margaret, it was her habit to discuss the reasons why that wise young virgin, with a lamp always trimmed and burning, had yet found no bridegroom.

Mrs. Sinclair used to ponder Margaret's present condition with a thought of her extreme good fortune in having all the dilemmas of her youth cut like a Gordian knot.

"It is such good taste your living so quietly here," she said every time she came ; "just for this year — there is nothing like being very quiet. One can hardly be quiet enough." But she, like some other people, looked for the bursting of the butterfly from the chrysalis.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE YEAR IS UP.

"I WILL wait a year and a day," Roger Charlton had said to himself when he heard that Robert Kent was dead. But one afternoon in the middle of August, when Margaret had been not quite twelve months a widow, as she sat on her porch with Miss Longstaffe and Gladys, she saw her old friend entering the gate. She was slicing some peaches which Mr. Wilkins had given her when she came home from her day's work.

"There is Mr. Charlton, Gladys," she said; "go down and meet him. Then get another plate and spoon, and he shall eat peaches and cream with us."

Thus with ravishing ease the young man found himself presently sitting opposite Mrs. Kent, in what seemed to his perceptions precisely the old way. Not that she looked exactly like the old Margaret, but then her black dress naturally made a difference. Her face was less *riante* and arch, but she dispensed the fruit with the old charming air he knew.

"These are the first peaches we have had," she said. "Our early peaches, like the first little pig, go to market. These are the insignificant little pigs, that stay at home. I suppose you, Mr. Charlton, have been eating peaches since April?"

"I never eat fruit—I'm a son of Adam, and it does not agree with me. However, I shall eat this saucer of peaches and cream regardless of consequences."

It was well on towards three years since they two had met, and the interval had probably done its work in enlarging Roger's experiences and adding to his culture; but he had, to Margaret's eyes, changed little from the elegant, over-serious youth of old days. He had a good deal to tell them of his European travels, a winter in Egypt and the Holy Land, and various exploits during a yachting excursion which had ended a week before. He had been everywhere, and could compare places, and link some association to each; and it seemed pleasant to his hearers, whose social experience had been narrowed down to the closest limits, to hear his mild discourse while the shadows lengthened and crept towards them from the row of maples which flanked the gate on either side.

Roger had never in his life been so happy. How poor and barren everything had been for him in the desert he had gone through without a glimpse of Margaret! This was no dreamy and trivial dilettanteism or æstheticism,—no running after interest and excitement in strange places, feeling himself all the time a mere shadow among shadows and shows of things. This was life, hope, happiness. When his dissertations on his own doings were over, he was glad enough to listen to Margaret and Gladys, who told him about their lives. When it grew darker and chillier they went in and drank tea and ate bread and

butter in the little "south parlor"; Gladys brought out a wonderful cake of her own concoction, and it was to the young man the most delightful feast in the world. It was all so easy, so simple, and above all it was so full of charm. To go on drinking cups of souchong and eating cake while Margaret talked, appealing to Gladys and Miss Longstaffe, — giving little domestic histories and confidences, — illuminating the life she led, and opening it up to his fancy, by a thousand minute tapers of comment and suggestion, — was the acme of enjoyment. This was what he wanted for the remainder of his life, and, this secured, the rest of the world might go by as it chose.

It was little Gladys, all unknowing, who ruthlessly interrupted this blissful frame of mind by her hospitable zeal.

"And here is a bonbon for you, Mr. Charlton," she said, offering him a box of French comfits. "They are very nice. Mr. Updegraeff brought them to me."

"Mr. Updegraeff!" said Roger, turning pale, as if some Banquo's ghost had suddenly broken in upon the feast; "Tom Updegraeff! Has he been here?"

"Yes," answered Margaret, to whom he had flung this sharp question, accenting it by his searching, conscious glance. "He came out some three weeks ago for an hour or two, and looked in upon us for a while the day before yesterday."

"I thought," said Roger, with an utterly overwhelming feeling of pain and defeat, "that Tom Up-

degraeff was in Norway. He told me he was going to Norway in June."

"He said nothing about Norway that I recall. Sarah, do you remember whether Mr. Updegraeff said anything about Norway?"

"He talked about most things," returned Miss Longstaffe, "but, so far as I heard him speak, he did not allude to Norway."

Such perfidy, such black, bitter perfidy, almost broke Roger's heart. The two young men had met at Paris in May, and each had been urgently desirous to hear the plans of the other. And each had besides been eager to detail his own scheme of amusement for the ensuing three or four months, with an absence of secrecy which left nothing to be desired. Tom had in view a whole season of hunting and fishing in Norway, which could not be perfected until late in September; while Roger had bought a new steam-yacht, and was to do the Hebrides, with a complete edition of William Black's novels as guide-books, and a party on board who should combine such contrasting elements of everything entertaining that they might have wintered in an ice-floe without ennui. Yet, alas! for lover's promises! Neither Norway nor the Hebrides was to be the object of either's pilgrimage this year. Both led here, and Roger, with humiliation, with chagrin, with bitter wrath, acknowledged that he had allowed himself to be beaten by yielding to scruples of delicacy and good taste. There had been evidently neither delicacy nor good taste in Updegraeff's invasion of

this hallowed shrine. This bonbon he had unwittingly accepted, — tempting, luscious, poisonous, — with its multitude of gathered sweets, was a mere symbol of that rival's insidious and deadly tactics. He had come with a bribe in his hand for Gladys, a sop to Cerberus. Roger said within himself, with a gloomy sense of incompetence and failure, that there was little good in following refined and chivalrous instincts. It had not been any meagre parsimony which had restrained him from bringing the little girl some costly bawble or box of sweets; but because he had said to himself that there was no delicacy of feeling and of manner which he must not be capable of in meeting Margaret again. He must take nothing for granted; he must expect to begin at the beginning, and build up for himself in her mind a new interest in him. Alas! alas!

It was time for him to go, or he could not return to town that night. He rose reluctant, chilled, discontented, sad at heart, and made his adieux with all the energy and spirit flatly gone out of him. The moon was shining with such a pretty play of light across the yard that Margaret went out on the porch to look at it. Roger stood on the path below, gazing up at her. She seemed to him pure, unapproachable, magnificent. He could have fallen on his knees.

"May I come again?" he said in a low voice.

"Oh, surely come again some time. Not too soon. I am very busy — I cannot often spend an afternoon like this."

Then Roger burst out, —

"Tom Updegraeff may come, —but not I! I see it all! I am not so dull but that I see it all. And it breaks my heart. Oh, Mrs. Kent, if you knew — if you could guess with what feelings I waited until I believed that I might with propriety come, you would pity me! I was afraid to offend you — to grieve you. I would have been here months ago had I not feared to displease you. Not a day, not an hour, have you been out of my thoughts. And the scruples which have robbed me of energy — which have stifled the feelings that were ready to overpower me — are scruples which you would forgive."

Margaret might well have smiled at this petulant outbreak, but she did not smile, — she was half ready to cry instead. It was a reminder of what she longed to forget, — to triumph over as an unworthy piece of her life lived down and redeemed by her better purposes in the present. She was just a step above him as he stood on the path, and the moon shone on her face. She looked down at him quietly, proudly, with what seemed to him a half-crushing equanimity.

"I do not exactly see what I have done to deserve this," she said, gently. "It is a long time since we met until to-day. I have certainly not thought of you as constantly as you say you have thought of me, but I have always remembered you as one of my few kind friends in an epoch when I depended on what friends I had, and sadly needed them."

"I was not a friend then — I am not a friend now," cried poor Roger. "You knew all the time

then that I was pretending — that I concealed my feelings although they tortured me. You were out of my reach, — but I could see you and worship you, enjoy your presence like that of sunshine and blue skies. I did my best, — but beyond a certain point I was powerless to struggle. Everybody knew that I adored you.”

“Mr. Charlton, this is absurd,” said Margaret, growing less kind and more impatient. “If you were at that time a foolish boy, with impetuous feelings you had not the good sense to govern, it is surely a thing to pass over silently, with a feeling of regret and shame that you did me such a wrong as to set the world talking about me. You are older now, — and you ought to be wiser. Don’t be proud of what ought to be atoned for with bitter repentance and fresh and good resolves. You talk about delicate scruples, — but I confess you do not make them evident to me. This is very inconsiderate — not to say ungenerous.”

“I should like to be considerate — I should like to be generous,” declared Roger; “but when I heard that Tom Updegraeff had been here, it seemed to me time to give up conventionalities which he had discarded as superfluous.”

“What do you know about Mr. Updegraeff’s coming here?” said Margaret, with a disdain at once enchanting and crushing to Roger. “I assure you of one thing: Mr. Updegraeff discarded as superfluous none of the reserves of good taste.”

“Will you answer me one question, Mrs. Kent?”

"Certainly."

"Are you engaged to Tom?"

"No."

The two looked at each other in the moonlight. Roger was momentarily elated at this news, yet, at the same time, had a horrible feeling that she understood him, but that he could never understand her. She could measure his feelings, and know his weakness and incapacity, while she herself was far beyond everything save his worship and his ideals.

"I need not, then, give up all hope," said he, simply. "Unless you will some day be my wife, I have no future, I have no ambition, I have no place in the world. I hope for nothing else, and I ask for nothing else. I was happy and confident when I came to-day, and all seemed so unchanged. Now I feel broken and defeated, and yet I can scarcely tell why. Is it that you are changed?"

"I hope so," answered Margaret. "God knows I have tried to change,—to grow older,—to grow better. And I have lived through a good deal. If I had not changed, I should be a poor creature. I have had to teach myself to accept a great many things I once rejected, and not to care much about personal pleasure, so many other necessities have urged stronger claims upon my inclination and my will. So I trust I am a better woman than when you used to know me."

Roger looked at her dumbly for a moment: his eyes were wet, and his mouth worked. Then he muttered,

"May I come again?"

"Come now and then, if you will come just as a friend."

"But I have said I cannot be simply a friend."

"Have you tried? We all have to give up something. You don't know much about sacrifice. Suppose you begin by giving up all your old cherished ideas of me."

"You won't be my wife, then?"

"Oh, no. That is altogether impossible."

Roger was very miserable.

"I shall not give up what is the best part of myself," said he, piteously. "And, after all, why should you not some time come to like me?"

Margaret laughed.

"You had better go now," she said, "or you will miss your train." Roger went, half heart-broken, — yet his despair assuaged by the conviction that he need not draw down the black veil of visible finality over his first and only love-affair, since Mrs. Kent was not engaged to Updegraff.

CHAPTER XXXII.

KISMET.

ONE bitter January morning, more than a year after the circumstances recounted in the previous chapter, Dr. Walton, just arrived from Europe, walked up from the pier to the station of the elevated railroad, and was suddenly accosted, while he was putting his ticket in the box, by a woman in black, who came up to him with a pale, anxious face, and a half-disordered appearance.

"How do you do, Dr. Walton?" she said; and, like a flash of lightning, what had been perfectly unrecognizable at first was instantly illuminated to him.

"Why, Miss Longstaffe," said he, "how are you?" He looked into her face, which seemed to him woe-stricken.

"It seems to me you are in trouble," said he.

"Oh, I am," she said. "Gladys is very ill. I have come over for some of the city doctors. When I saw you, you seemed to me a direct answer to prayer. Tell me what to do — where to go."

"You mean Gladys Kent. What is the matter with her?"

"Diphtheria."

"Where is she?"

Miss Longstaffe told him.

"When is the next train?"

It left in twenty minutes. They had just time to go back to the ferry which Miss Longstaffe had lately crossed. Gaining the other side, Dr. Walton sent a telegram to a leading physician in the city, asking him to follow on the twelve o'clock train and consult on an important case.

"Now," said Alex, taking his seat by Miss Longstaffe in the car, "tell me all you can,—how long she has been sick,—when she was taken and how. Don't be afraid of being prolix. I will listen endlessly. Nothing is trivial about a severe illness."

Miss Longstaffe was glad enough to pour out a full recital. Gladys had been taken only the day before, and not until this morning had Margaret been roused to a sense of the little girl's danger. The local practitioner had come, had gravely pronounced it diphtheria of a malignant type,—and had said at once that it might be better to have some specialist out from New York to see her without delay. It seemed safest for Miss Longstaffe to go herself.

"And all the time," she said, putting her hand on Dr. Walton's coat-sleeve, "all the time my thoughts were running on you. I was perpetually saying to myself that if you were only in the city, I should go at once to you."

"You please me by saying that," said Alex. "It is a little singular that I came back to New York

just at this time solely on Gladys' account. You know that when she is twelve years old she begins to have a thousand a year from my uncle's estate. I wanted to arrange about that."

"Ah, poor little Gladys! Nobody knows what is in store for her here—perhaps a day may end it!"

Dr. Walton looked at her gravely and kindly.

"Tell me about her mother," said he.

"Margaret is just the same. Ever since her husband's death, she —"

"Her husband's death?" repeated Alex, the blood rushing to his face, then every vestige of color receding. "Do you mean to say Mrs. Kent is a widow?"

"Robert Kent died of yellow fever."

"No, you mistake. He was well in three days. I saw him after Mrs. Kent had come North."

"You are mistaken. Or you mixed up the two Kents—Robert Kent had a cousin, Robert Cary Kent, who got well. Robert died the day Margaret reached him. He had gone South on business a few weeks before the epidemic broke out. He was in the city, then went back to Redbank, was smitten down and died. When you saw Margaret there, he had been dead for days."

Dr. Walton was gazing into Miss Longstaffe's face with a look which she never forgot. He stretched out his hand, grasped hers, drew it to him and pressed it to his heart.

"Good angel of my life," he said, with an absolutely simple, unmixed emotion of joy and gratitude.

It was impossible for Miss Longstaffe to be quite unmoved, but it was equally impossible to yield gracefully to any sign of feeling. She glared at Alex with surprise and apparent disfavor, and drew her hand away with a jerk.

"Surely," said he, "you will forgive me now. I know you used not to regard me with much favor."

Miss Longstaffe looked out of the car window, was silent a moment, then glanced back at him.

"You are the only man in the world I should be willing to give Margaret to," she said, with a quaver of her dry old lips.

He made another effort to seize her hand, which she repulsed. She would not look at him. He leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Has Margaret thought it strange I did not come?"

"She has not said so."

"I ask no questions about her present position — if another man has come into her life. I could not bear it. I count on her fidelity to me."

"You may count on her being unmarried and disengaged. She has had plenty of offers."

Dr. Walton's face gloomed a little.

"Why could you not have written to me?" he asked, with some sharpness.

"Because I had no business to write. I should have done well, should I not, writing to beseech you to come home, — you who were doing a man's work somewhere else?" responded Miss Longstaffe, with indignation. "And, besides, I do not like to talk

about such things now, with poor little Gladys at the gates of death."

"I don't mean to be selfish and egoistic," said Alex. "I do not, indeed. And Gladys I regard as my own child."

The inexorable ticking of the clock, telling out the minutes and the hours that morning, had seemed to measure to Margaret the approach of a terrible anguish. She wanted the time to pass that Miss Longstaffe might return; yet who could tell what the swift flight of the morning might mean? A presentiment was on her from her first realization of the nature of Gladys' illness that the child was to die. The doctor had confirmed her fears and deepened her dread into despair. She felt within herself that she had always known that Gladys must die. Had it not been a pitiful sort of joke of hers to implore the child not to be so good and so well beloved of the gods, since those whom the gods loved must pay the penalty of dying so young — so very young? And she wondered how, with this superstition in her mind, far more deeply fixed than a mere idle fancy, she had not so watched and brooded over the little girl as to have kept all harm from her. The sense of an oppressive and remorseless destiny, against which she was powerless to struggle, weighed her down. She had borne much, and tried to be brave and never to yield to cowardly instincts; but at this final disaster she must give way helplessly and feebly. She experienced already the asphyxiat-

ing force of despair. The doctor had impressed upon her the necessity for certain incessant duties towards the sick child, but it was almost more than she could do to perform them. What had she done, she thought, to be crushed by this new torture? The silence was so terrible, broken only by that heavy breathing, and an occasional flute-like voice of wail from the bed! Margaret was ready to arraign the world, which had deserted her and was going on its many ways. What were her and her sorrow to any one alive save to Miss Longstaffe? What was little Gladys and her tortures? A little breath and bubble in the great wave of life and death, which floats from one deep, unknown of time, into the void of eternity.

"I'm very sick, mamma," Gladys panted, after a time. "You think I'm going to die."

"My darling, you are sick. But you must not die. You must not talk; you must not even open your eyes to look. All you need to do is to be brave, and to meet the pain and bear it; and, finally, please God, to get over it."

"Tell me something, mamma, to make me brave."

"What shall I tell you?"

"About that night you were going to die."

The allusion sorely tried Margaret. She had said to herself more than once to-day: "If Dr. Walton were here!" But she did not flinch. He had come into her life like a strong, beneficent angel, beckoning her away from the trivial and vain girlhood she had been so long in casting behind her.

Everything he had said to her, done for her, had the vividness to her mind and imagination of dawn after a black night. It was something to have known him — to have learned to grope for his measure and scale of the meanings of existence. She was a better woman that she had loved him. And if she never saw him again, he had not lived in vain for her.

"Shut your eyes, Gladys," she said now. "Try to rest, and I will tell you: Poor papa had died, you know, the first day I reached Redbank. He had been so far away that I could not reach him, although I went as swiftly as the cars would carry me. I could do nothing for poor papa, except to weep for him; but it was something, at least, to do for others what I was too late to do for him. But once at work among the sick, there was no end to what was needed. How could I sleep when I felt that somebody who was tormented by fever and pain might be longing for me? And I was strong. I felt that the best I could do was to give my youth and give my strength, and try to achieve some good before I died; for I believed I was going to die. I thought I was sure to take the fever; and finally, when I dropped down fainting at Sister Sarah's side, I said to myself, 'This is the end.' When I came to myself somebody was feeding me. It seemed to me more than half a pity to take such pains; and if I had had the strength, I would have said: 'Oh, let me die! Don't try to prop me up, but let me go.' But I could say nothing; I could only lie still. I felt a strong hand on my forehead — like mine, dear,

on yours now—and my hands were held tight and close in a large, warm clasp. A cordial seemed to be poured into my veins drop by drop; and after a time I opened my eyes. I had not thought before who it was; now I saw, and saw with, oh! such wonder and such gratitude, that it was Dr. Walton. Was it not strange? I began to be upborne, and floated as on angels' wings; for he was so strong, so good. His face was so noble and so beautiful. To look into his eyes was to look into a great sun of warmth and light. One only knows what one's Eternal Father is by the goodness and power one sees in his chosen ones. Dr. Walton made me feel as I had never before felt in my life. 'The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath thee are the everlasting arms.' So I got well. I could not help it, you know; because Dr. Walton said I must get well."

Gladys tried to smile into her mother's eyes. Margaret's quick, waiting ear caught the sound of the door downstairs.

"Sarah has come back," said she, and ran to the top of the staircase.

Somebody was ascending.

While Margaret lives she will never forget that moment. Alex Walton sprang towards her, held out his arms and clasped her to him.

"I've come," said he, — "never, never to leave you again, if you will let me stay."

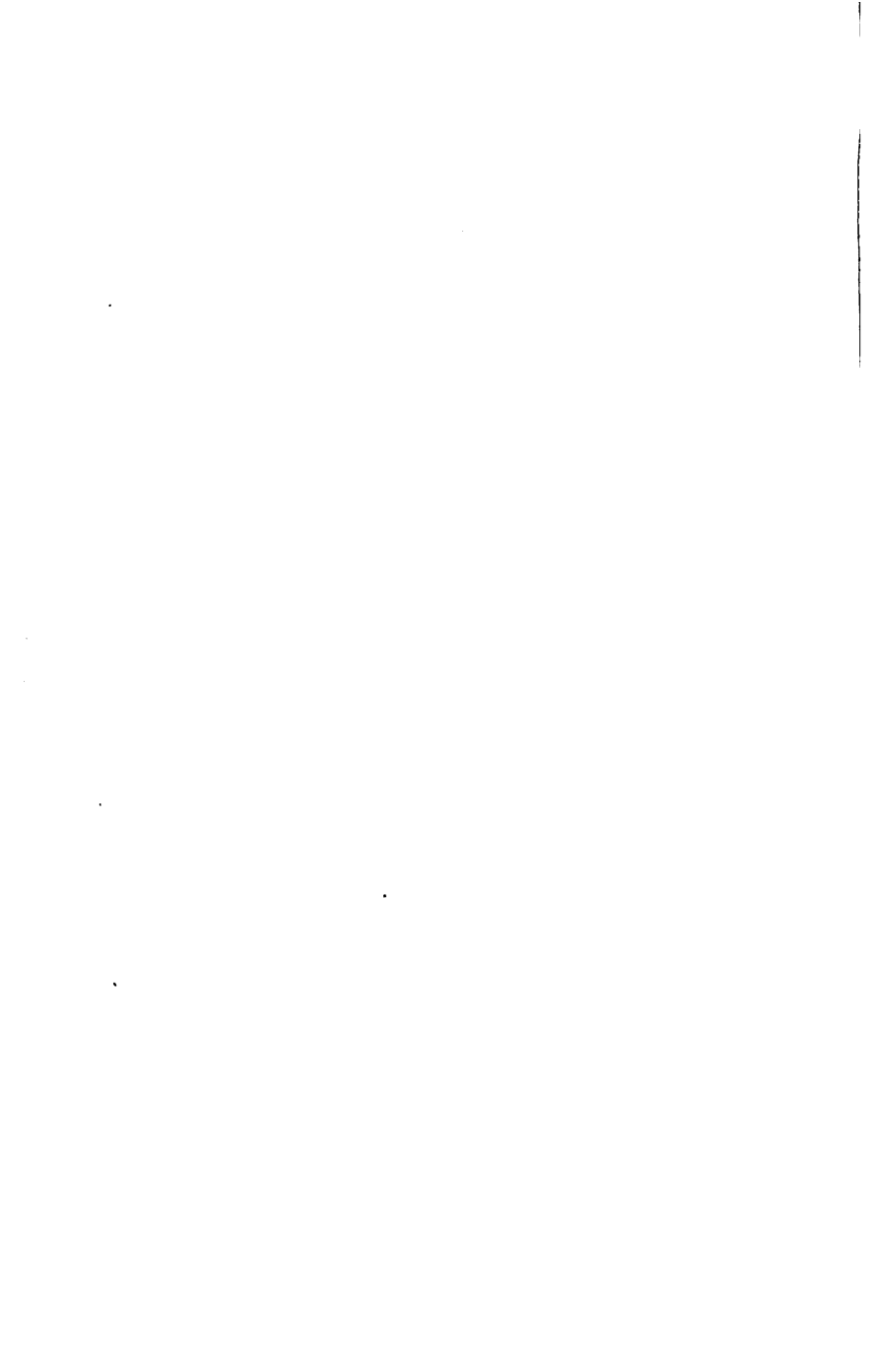
She clung to him one second, then lifted her head and showed him her quivering face.

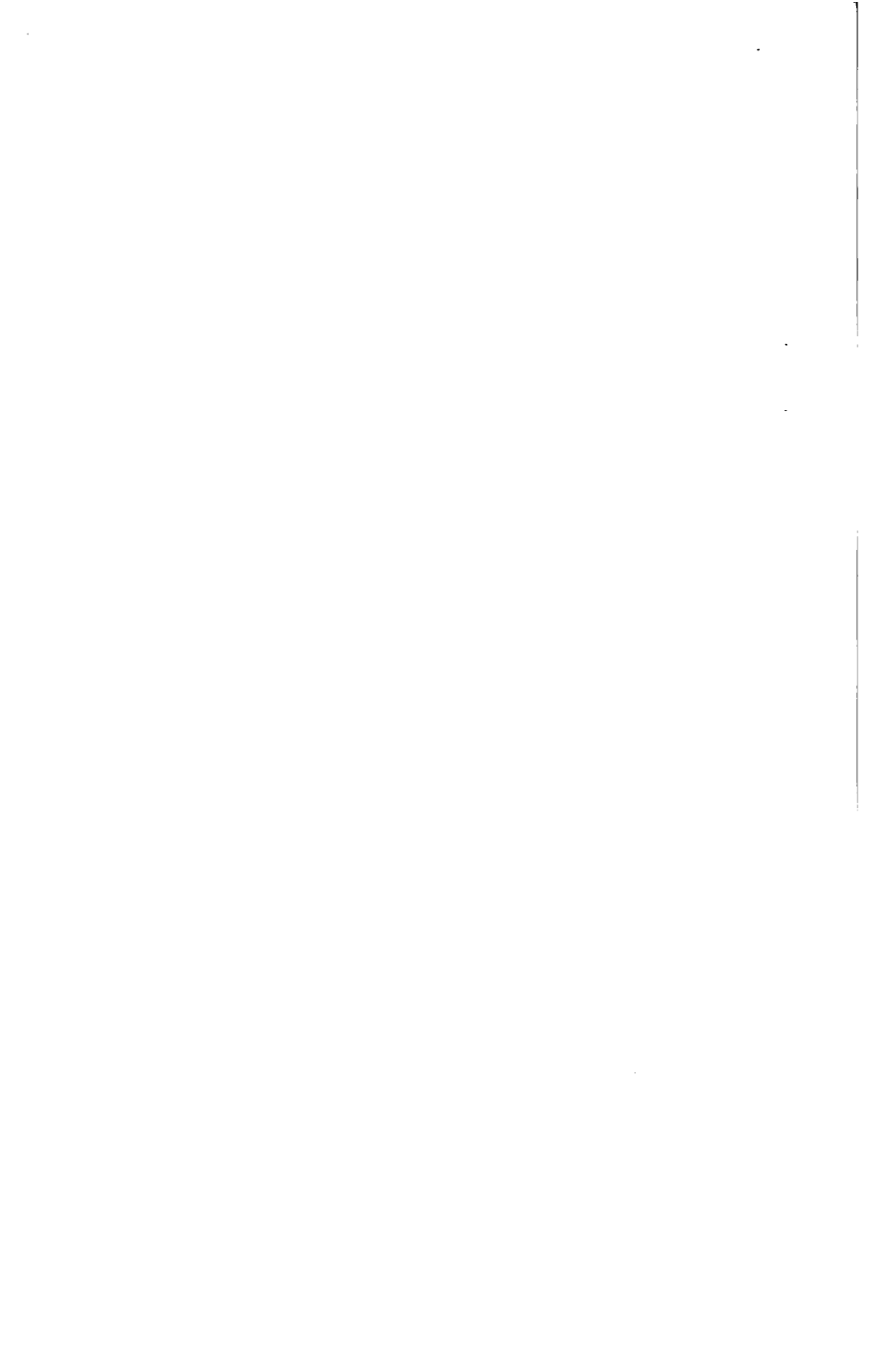
"Save Gladys for me," she said.

He nodded and went into the sick room.

The struggle was yet to come. For three days Alex fought hand to hand with the fell disease. Gladys endured, rallied, and lived. Though the gods loved her well, she did not die then.

We have brought Margaret Kent to the threshold of a new and happy life. We leave her there.





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